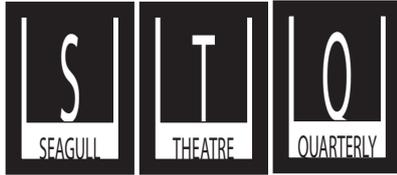






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THEATRE LOG

Editorial

Till fairly recently, creative writing by Indians in English was widely considered, by critics and the intelligentsia alike, a marginal affair. Mere elite dilettantism by a favoured few for a favoured few; superficial, frivolous, not to be taken seriously. Vernacular literature was the 'real thing'. A few years ago, the tables turned with a vengeance that is still hard to take in. More and more Indian voices are being heard in English; being critiqued, being studied, being published, earning awards and breath-taking advances, to the extent that established writers in English feel justified in dismissing vernacular literatures as insignificant—a sign both of their own ignorance, and of how things have changed. This new trend has been particularly noticeable in fiction, and in poetry.

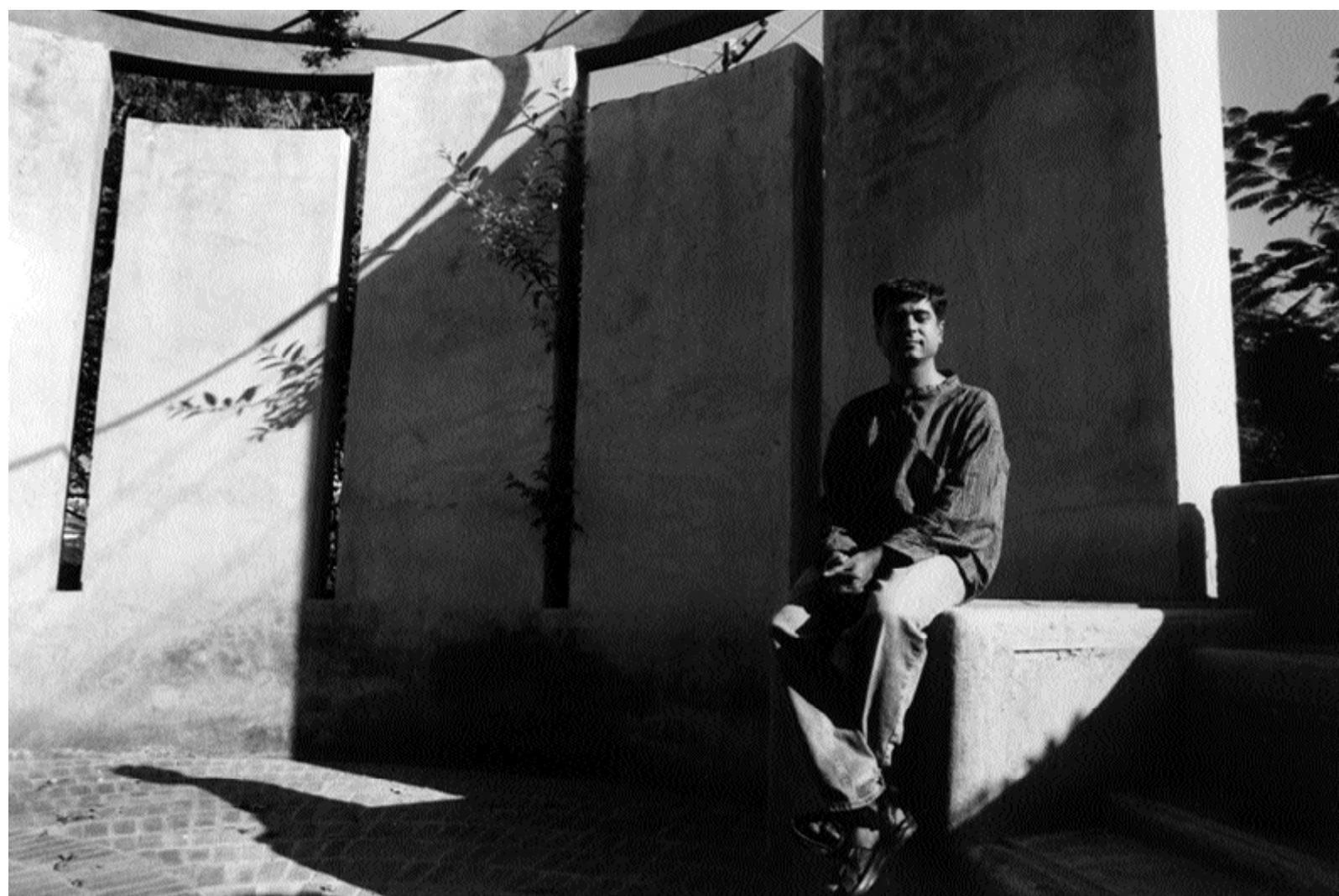
Perhaps the last of the genres to respond to this surge of confidence and prolificity in writing in English is that of drama. Although Indian playwrights in English have been around for decades, the bulk of theatre in English, from froth to the avant-garde, has always featured foreign plays. Today, however, there is finally a body of work, written by Indians, in English, to which theatre practitioners can turn when looking for plays to stage. A quickly growing body of work, dealing with contemporary themes in a contemporary language which is as Indian as any of the other vernaculars. And of these playwrights in English, the one name that stands out is Mahesh Dattani. Not only are his texts widely performed, but he has achieved that ultimate stamp of 'acceptability', the Sahitya Akademi Award—given to him in 1998 for the best literary work in the English language to be published over the previous four years.

This issue of *STQ* takes a look at original English language playwriting in this country. A probing interview with Mahesh Dattani helps him map his creative journey. This is followed by extracts from previously unpublished playwriting in English.

Anjum Katyal

Of Page and Stage:

An Interview with Mahesh Dattani



A much-performed writer-director, Mahesh Dattani was one of the first playwrights writing in English to receive wide exposure on the Indian stage. In this interview, held on 9 August 1999 for *STQ*, he talks of how he prefers to see himself as a theatre worker rather than just a playwright. The interview was conducted by Anjum Katyal, with Vikram Iyengar and Padmini Ray Chaudhury also present.

My parents moved to Bangalore soon after their marriage. My sisters and I were born in Bangalore. I come from a family where theatre was something of a community event. To them theatre was a way of being in touch with their community—the Gujarati Lohana community. So every time there was a group from Ahmedabad or Bombay, putting up a Gujarati play, it became an event to go to, to meet other people from the community. We Lohanas tend to stick together.

I don't have memories from when I was very young. The one play that I do remember, I must have been anything between ten to twelve years. It was this play which came to Ravindra Kalakshetra. A Gujarati play. I was fascinated. Later I came to know that the play was Madhu Rye's *Koi Pun Ek Phool Nu Naam Bolo Tho*. In English it would be *Tell Me the Name of a Flower*. It was also made into a telefilm, called *Kisee Ek Phool Ka Naam Lo*. Now, it used the play within a play concept, which I had never seen on stage before. It came as a shock. I mean, it begins with all these extra-marital affairs going on, very teasing, very playful, which a lot of Gujarati theatre tends to be. The costumes, make-up and lights were bright. At the end of the act there is a scene where the protagonist is supposed to shoot at one of the characters, and she turns around and shoots at someone in the audience, who falls down and is carried away. And the curtain drops. That breaking away from the proscenium—

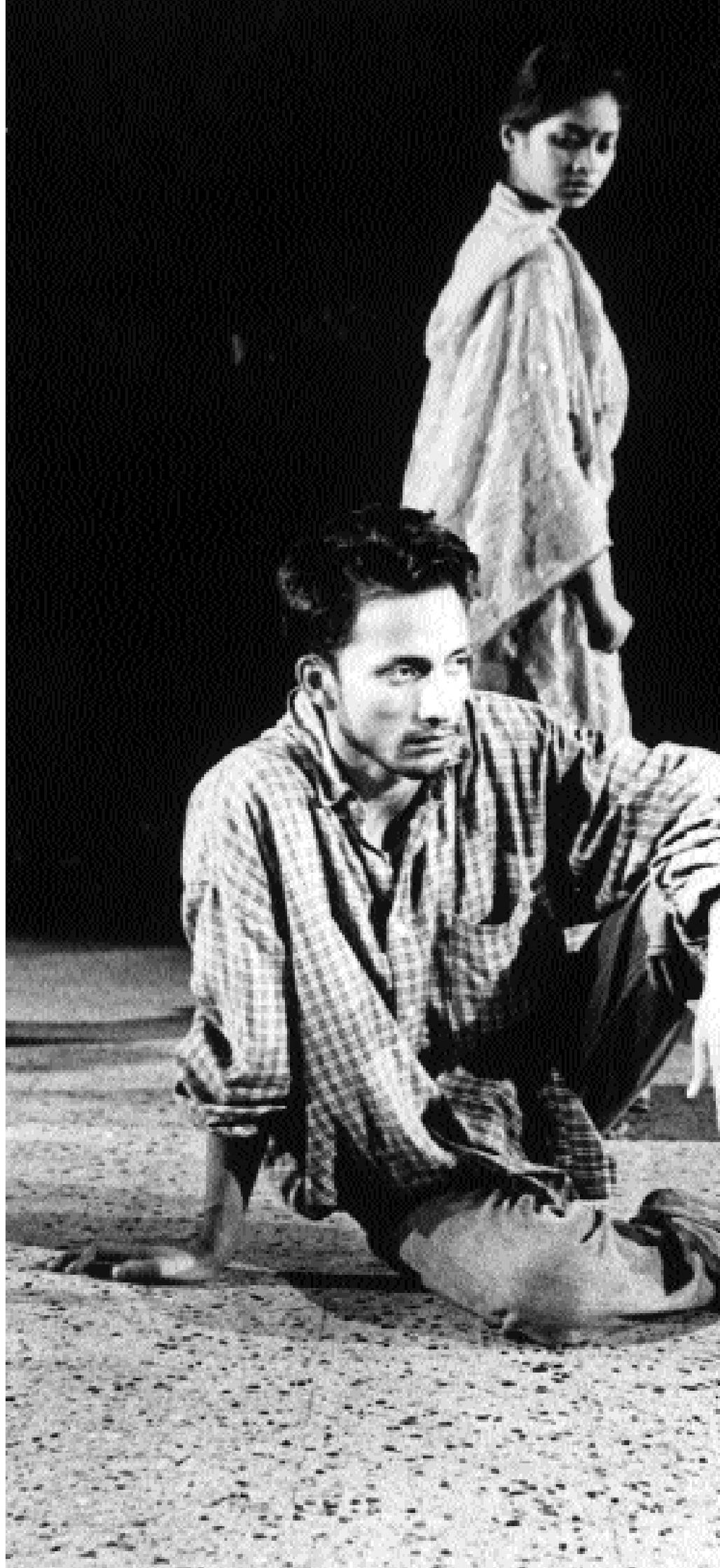
Alyque Padamsee's production of Final Solutions



until that moment you didn't realize that it was a play within a play. It was like getting an electric shock. I didn't know if it was real, I mean was it a real gun, were they real bullets, did she actually shoot someone, and the theatre was abuzz. I mean, people were obviously very enthralled and excited at the dramatic ending. So that's my first impression of theatre. I don't think anything excited me as much as that particular moment.

This would have been in the late 60s or early 70s. I was born in 1958, and I don't think I was older than twelve. So it must have been in the late 60s. Madhu Rye was a sensational playwright. His *Kumarni Agashe* (*Kumar's Terrace*) which I saw later on, again had a very bold theme.

At that point I don't think it occurred to me that I could be a theatre person, because I didn't have any role models. One just assumed that I would study, probably go to college or, if not, just finish school and join dad in his



business, an agency for machinery to make corrugated boxes. Later on I did join the business and I was with him for almost 10 years before I decided to take on theatre full time.

You said that theatre was not something you have memories of from a younger age, but were there any other creative pursuits you liked?

Yes. I liked to make clocks and little carts out of cardboard. I would cut up pieces of cardboard and stick them together with glue, nothing unusual.

But things that worked?

That's right. Yes, movement. That's the other thing. I would be fascinated by anything that moved. Like a clock's pendulum was fascinating. And the fact that I used to make these carts out of matchboxes. There was this one trick where you had this rubber band and you put in a match stick and you wound it up and it would move, it would hop, as it unwound. I was very fond of painting. Later on I did a course in painting. The other thing I remember after that was, I had some school friends who were equally interested in drama. I'm not so sure whether it was the way we spoke English or what, but we never got any parts in the annual school Christmas pageant. I'm not sure of the reason, but then, you know, I was very shy and I had a very soft voice—that could be the reason. I had a friend who didn't live very far from me, and we used to meet on his terrace. We would set up a curtain with old saris. I think it was a tank which we used as the stage. I remember the stage was at a height. We would dress up as kings and queens and things and make cardboard crowns and what not, and do a little play. Things like, again, murder. Murder mysteries fascinated me at that stage.

When you enacted these little plays or skits, were they all from already existing stories or did you make them up?

No, no we made them up. We didn't know that there was such a thing as a script or an existing story. I think we did do some stories that we'd heard of, but I'm not so sure that we did anything that we'd read in the school library. So these were largely invented stories.

Were you both equally involved with the scripting or did you do most of it?

I did most of the scripting. This is interesting, now that you mention it, it all sort of clicks. (*Laughs*) That is probably where it all began. Because I never thought of . . . I mean, the whole point of doing the play was to dress up and act in it. So you did a script because you needed a story, not because you wanted to do the script. It was to give ourselves parts to do. That phase didn't last very long because we didn't have much of an audience. Mostly his family. Because his parents didn't know my parents. So there was no interaction. But he had a fairly extended family, so there were uncles and aunts and grandmothers and people like that. And they'd all indulge us. I think it was a novelty that we were doing it in English, also. So I guess it was amusing to them.

How old were you?

Probably around twelve. Which means, I must have seen *Tell Me the Name of a Flower* earlier. Because I wasn't into my teens. I was really very small. So I must have seen it around ten. I remember we were in the fifth or sixth standard. So those are my early memories. My mother

told me—I don't have memories of this—that whenever they took me to a movie, I would say, when is the dance coming? And I would wait for the dance. I was very fond of Vijayantimala. At that time, you know, they had two curtains in the cinema halls. After the national anthem, you would have one curtain sliding laterally, and you would have the satin curtain coming down. I would insist on waiting till both the 'small curtain' and the 'big curtain' came down and then we would leave the movie hall.

So you had a sense of proper closure!

I don't know whether it was that or just the movement, the way the whole thing worked. I think maybe that's what it was. Maybe if I hadn't taken up theatre I would have been a mechanical engineer or something.

You were talking about how you used to do this acting with your friends.

We must have done it twice or thrice at the most, and then we lost out on our audiences.



There's a lesson to be learnt there somewhere! (*Laughs*) So my first theatre company folded up with the old saris. let's see what else . . . Yes, dancing. That's something I was interested in. I remember *Amrapali*. There's this fabulous court dance, where Vijayantimala is playing Amrapali and Sunil Dutt is the king and there was this very erotic scene where she doesn't know he is the king and he's wounded and he takes off his clothes and she suddenly discovers she's in love with him, and later on there's the court dance. It was a typical filmy dance, but Vijayantimala had a lot of energy and verve and with her classical background training, she definitely had a presence. So I do remember that. I was very fond of Hindi movies, especially the songs. *Mughal-e-Azam*, you know the famous scene where he's sweeping her face with that feather and she's got this ecstatic look. *Mughal-e-Azam* was another film which all of us, the entire family, liked. Every time we had morning shows of that film, my mom would take me to see it. And there's that wonderful number, 'Pyar kiya to darna kya', in which suddenly the film changes into Technicolor—the Sheesh Mahal—and there's one scene where she's doing her *chakkars*, and her images are reflected from those glass pieces. Those are the scenes I remember.

*Mahesh Dattani's
amphitheatre in Bangalore
Photo: Patrick Wilson*

When you did your plays on the terrace, did you use any of the Hindi film scenes or plots?

No, we didn't do that, which is quite surprising, because I think to us a play meant what we saw in school. Like the Christmas play, kings and queens, cardboard crowns. We were very much into that. The thought that we could do something from cinema on stage, didn't occur to any of us. For us, the stage meant doing your costumes and those crowns and pencil moustaches and saris as robes and things like that.

Dancing was something you were fond of.

Yes, yes. And my first introduction to dance was cinema. Vijayantimala. I studied dance too, later on, in my twenties. I recall dancing to 'She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah' (*laughs*). And we used to get Radio Ceylon, Engelbert Humperdink and Jim Reeves . . . that was how I was introduced to English songs and English music, through Radio Ceylon. And the Osmonds, there was this sugary sweet 'Mother of Mine.' And of course, there was the romance

with Hindi cinema. I wasn't very fond of English films. We did see *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Sound of Music*, the wholesome films proper for all school kids to see. I wasn't too fond of James Bond, somehow, though everyone else was . . .

I was a fairly attentive, but not very intelligent student by any standard (*laughs*), quite average. I liked the English classes where the teachers enacted Shakespeare. I remember one teacher who would enact the scenes from *Great Expectations*, that was very exciting as well. And we had a very good Hindi teacher, who had a booming voice. He would read out stories. There were these really silly children in the stories who were virtuous and honest, never got up to any mischief and always studied well . . . mythical children who don't exist. None of us could identify with them.

What else do I remember? Our sixth standard class teacher was very keen that children learn. I think I developed my interest in art and painting through her. At that time, mind you, it was a rarity. We had carpentry and we charkha. But we didn't have a regular art class, not in the boy's school at least. She introduced us to collage. And our librarian had this very stern exterior. But if she found out that a child was interested in reading she would encourage him. And she had these LPs which she played on a tiny portable player: productions of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night* and others. During lunch break, she would set aside ten minutes. We could finish our lunch, go to the library, she would play it for ten minutes and we would follow it in the book. Suddenly we discovered the humour in the plays.

I didn't have many friends. I wasn't a sports person, never really fancied cricket. I liked hockey, although I never played it.

When you look back now, do you feel there was a particular time of your life when you changed drastically, or that you feel was important from the point of view of your development?

I think it was college, during the plus two stage. Because I had a lot more freedom, I made a lot more friends. And that's where the Bangalore Little Theatre came in. That was a major step. The very first play, apart from the Gujarati plays I'd seen in my early years, the very first English language play I saw on the public stage was Bangalore Little Theatre's production of Alan Ayckbourn's *Table Manners*. It's a trilogy. I think the first part is set in the garden. You have all the people in the play exiting and going in to dinner and coming out. And the second part is set in the dining and living room. So all the exits from that play are the entries in this play.

Somewhat like your Bravely Fought the Queen?

Yes, a lot of people have compared it. It didn't strike me when I wrote *Bravely Fought the Queen*, but obviously that was the influence, because the very first play that I saw in English was *Table Manners*.

*The premiere production of
Bravely Fought the Queen
Photo: Somashekar*

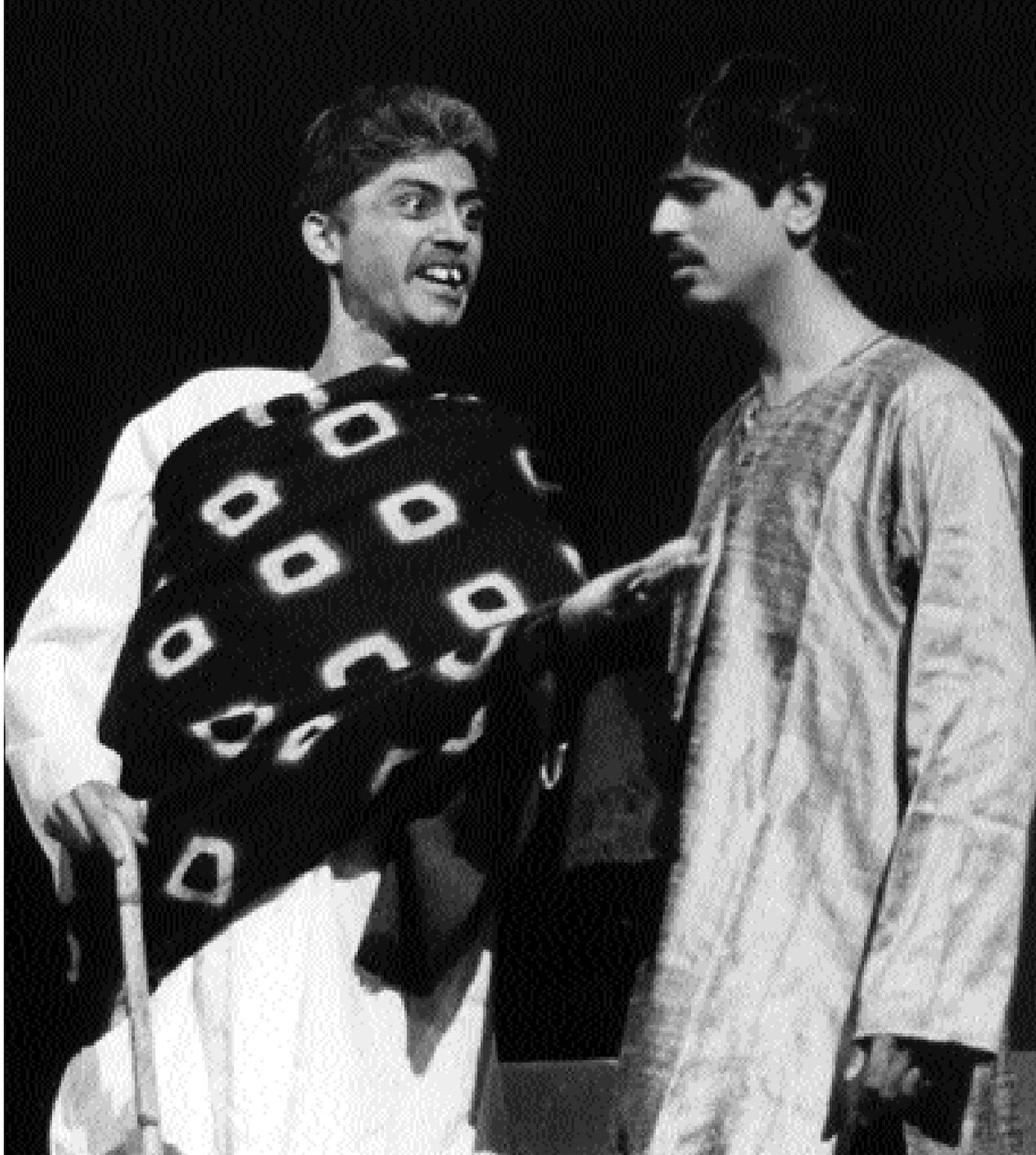




Ayque Padamsee's production of Tara

Do you remember your reaction to that play?

Yes, yes I do. Because that was the first comedy of manners, you could say English manners, that I'd seen. It's all about eating and irony and stuff like that, which isn't there on the Gujarati stage. Although I'd seen comedies, they were more situational—slapstick and stuff like that. But this kind of comedy made an impact. I found it funny, which was an eye opener for me. They had a circular with the programme, which they distributed, asking, are you interested in dramatics? If so please contact so and so. I knew someone who was acting in it, so I went backstage and said I want to join, I want to join. And she said, why don't you come, we're having a green room party. That's the first time I heard the expression green room party. So I went, and I met the other actors. Jagdish and Arundhati Raja were acting in it. I didn't know them then. I gave my name and address,



Where There's a Will

and paid the student subscription of five rupees or something. And then I waited. And then I got this notice from them for an audition for two plays. There were two short plays. It was a newcomers' thing. The directors were new, actors were new. Before that I had gone to an audition for a play which C. R. Sinha, a very well known Kannada theatre director, was directing. It fell through, but I didn't get a part in it and I was terribly disappointed. Then later I went to this audition and got a part, and that was really something. We rehearsed at the Indian Institute of Management. We even put it up in their hall.

How did your family respond to this?

Oh they loved it, that I had a hobby—

So there was no stigma attached?

No, no, absolutely none. I must say that my parents are traditional, definitely, and they take a great deal of pride in their traditions, and they might have disapproved of something, but they never imposed their views on me. I think the very fact that they put us all in English medium convent schools was a sign. I mean there was a Gujarati school there, and all the other Gujarati children from the same kind of business class background went to it.

So you joined Bangalore Little Theatre—what was that experience like, what do you feel was valuable from that?

Oh, a great deal. The very first workshop that I've ever taken was by Vijay Padaki. He was very much the mover and shaker of BLT then. And the very first play I directed was co-directed with Abhijit Sengupta. How they'd set it up was that a senior experienced person would come to rehearsals and you could always consult him or her, but everything else would be done by the newcomer. So he co-directed with me.

Something like the Red Curtain here in Calcutta, a similar model, where they actively trained the younger recruits. Carry on. You were talking about your first play.

It was interesting. I didn't get rave notices, I don't think anyone came up to me and said I acted well or anything. But I don't think that mattered. I don't think at that stage I realized I could specialize, direct, write. But I decided to direct a play. That's where I met Abhijit. I directed George Bernard Shaw's *Passion, Poison and Putrefaction*. It's this very silly play where this woman has a lover and her husband comes home and he drinks a bowl of plaster of Paris by mistake and solidifies. So he's just lying there and she doesn't know what to do, and then she makes soda and gives it to him and he pops up again. Things like that. It's what Shaw calls a 'mere trifle'.

You chose the play?

I chose the play.

What appealed to you?

I liked the comedy in it, also the action. I felt that it was so bizarre and it had some really funny lines. That's what attracted me. And also the fact that I was looking for plays with a small cast. That had a cast of four. And it had to be 20-30 minutes long. It was received well. People said, you should direct more. That was quite a good experience, working with actors, handling actors, sound effects and costumes and what not. That was good fun.

And had you written anything up to then?

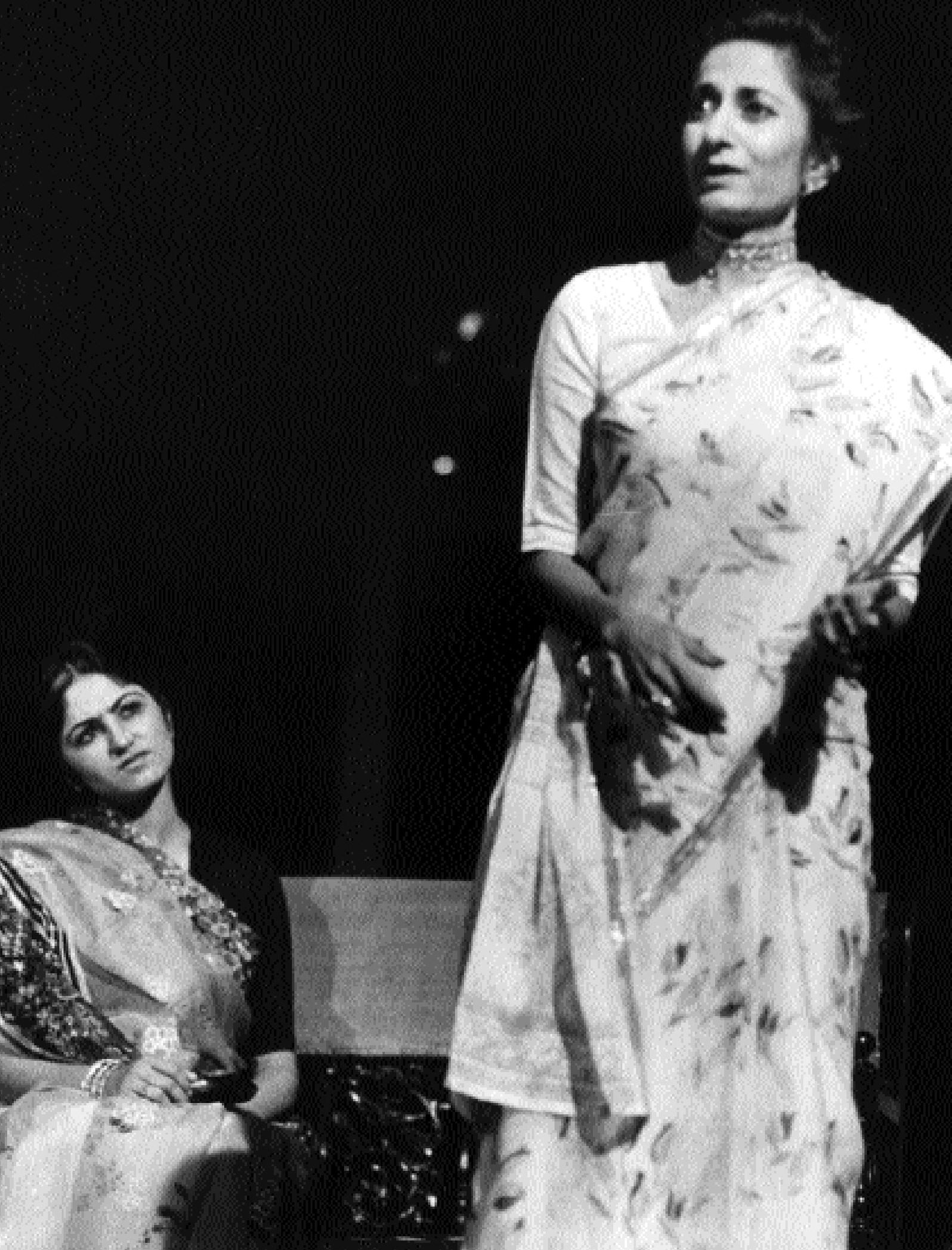
No, nothing, not a word. In fact, I began writing only after I saw *Neela Kamra* in Bombay. *Neela Kamra* is Madhu Rye's *Kumarni Agashe* in Hindi. This was when I joined my dad in the business, after college. My work took me to Bombay quite often. That's when I was introduced to Bombay theatre. There's a story there. And in fact, that's the turning point. I was fascinated. Shafi Inamdar had directed it. And it had some famous actress, I can't remember her name, but she was obviously a star, because it had her name up in bold letters. I didn't know it was adapted from Madhu Rye—no playwright was announced. And that play just bowled me over. It was amazing what it did. Because it was talking about sexuality. It was talking about this young man who is attracted, sexually attracted, to his sister in law. In traditional Gujarati families your bhabhi is like your mother. So it's almost incestuous. The whole thing is about this young man who committed suicide. Again, it had a really good structure. Act One is set in a party, where this sister in law and her husband are in town. It's a farewell party for a friend who's known them since earlier days, and who is migrating abroad. They haven't been told that it's his farewell party. So it's all this chatter, chatter, chatter in the beginning, party talk, people talking about things. And then suddenly the host tells her, Nisha, Bipin is coming. And



suddenly, crisis, they want to rush away—

What you responded to was the content and the structure?

Yes. Both. Yes. Definitely. Again. Because structure is something I remember very well, whether it was *Table Manners*, *Tell Me the Name of a Flower*, or *Neela Kamra*. The structure is something I can tell you about in detail. Exactly what happened. Where that actress stood in the witness box, where the lights turned red and things like that. Because the way Gujarati theatre works is, wherever you have the 'plot point', where something major is happening, they feed all the lighting effects and the music and everything and sort of prop it up. To get the audience interested. I think that helped me understand structure well. Even with *Neela Kamra*, it was the structure and the content. And at the end of Act I, Bipin, this unwelcome guest of theirs, is saying he's going away and then he tells Harshad, your brother didn't commit suicide, it was murder—and I blame you, Nisha, for it. And he points a finger at her and I remember they were playing some very showy music and she goes down and there's an amber spot on her and you're left there, wondering what's going to happen. And the second act is set in the barsati where Kumar is staying. He's moved away from Ahmedabad, and he's studying there. His brother and sister-in-law visit him, and that's where the relationship develops. And she's very flattered, she teases him and plays the game, not realizing that she's hurting his feelings, that he's taking it seriously. And then there's this party scene where she's flirting with everyone. He realizes that she can never be his, and he jumps off the terrace. The second act ends with him jumping off the terrace.



So again you have this major high there. And then the third act is back to the party where he's said this. She doesn't deny it, she questions each one—do you believe him or do you not. And everyone says, of course not. But their attitude towards her has changed. So she says, you do believe it. And finally there's this climax, she says, yes, that was exactly the way it happened, and I tell you, I'm happy, I mean, how many of you could say that a young man died for you. And then it freezes—

It obviously left a deep impact. So you like melodramatics.

Yes! Very much. It's something which is—

—all those Hindi films—

Right. Ya.

So, just before we move on from Bangalore Little Theatre, looking back now, what do you think were the most valuable things you learnt there that you're still using now, that influenced your work?

I think what Vijay Padaki taught us in a very basic workshop was group work. And I think that stayed on. The concept of group work.

Do you connect that with your play writing?

I'm not so sure whether it's connected with my play writing. It could be, but I'm not sure. But it's definitely connected with my involvement in theatre as a director. I always go for group work. Even in the plays I tend to choose.

And the plays you tend to write?

I think that's true, now that you mention it. If you look at my plays, you would find that each character, every character has, you know, his or her space in the play, which an actor can develop. So even if the play . . . like say *Tara* is about the twins, but the parents have significant parts and so does the Doctor who did the surgery, and the male twin as narrator, and stuff like that. So definitely , group work seems—

I find it very interesting because we don't have many playwrights who've come into play writing from acting and directing.

I think that's the tragedy. I think that's what they lose out on. They have to have a theatre background. Now if you want to be a playwright and you don't have a theatre background, you should begin by getting involved in a production. Because there's nothing like that experience.

What does it give you?

Well, you realize that you're not writing to be read. Number One. That the actors are going to take your script and they're going to do other things with it. Right from very basic things like entries and exits, and the fact that if you have characters on stage, there has to be a justification for them to be there. Stuff like that, which I find missing from a lot of playwrights who don't have a theatre background. Like, you know, a lot of my students tend to write, she says I'll get you a glass of water. And the stage directions say, she goes into the kitchen and brings the water. Now what's happening? Where's the action? Everyone on stage is waiting for this woman to get into the kitchen (*laughs*). And the thing is, when it's performed, to quicken it, it looks so artificial, somebody standing offstage with a tray and glasses of water. She goes off and picks it up and comes on again, you know. You can tell—

So you're saying that the nitty gritty of moving on stage, physical bodies occupying space and what they do is very important to think about when you're writing.

Exactly. And most important, that you're writing for space, you're not writing for page. A lot of playwrights write for page, whereas you have to think of space. And that I think is something which you understand only when you're involved in theatre. No amount of

theorizing helps there. That's why even in my workshops, I have a playwrights' and actors' workshop running back to back. And then the scenes that the playwrights start coming up with, the actors will explore in space. And then it strikes them, what I had said earlier about the translation from page to stage. And that's where it belongs. Not on the page.

Another thing is brevity. No, more than that is—what I constantly keep saying to my workshop students—phrasing. In day to day speech, if you are writing naturalistically, you don't speak in complete sentences. The way you phrase your sentences will tell you something about who you are and your emotional state at that moment while speaking. And how to use pauses, you know. Why you need to use pauses. Simple things. Like the scene has people watching television over there and a character comes in and says, there's nothing interesting on television tonight. Now on page it seems perfectly fine. But the minute you put it in space, I say, look, you know that they're watching television, she knows that they're watching television, the audience knows that they're watching television, so all she has to do is look at the screen and say, there's nothing interesting on television tonight. You don't have to say, there's nothing interesting on *television* tonight. You don't have to, you know, spell it out. And that makes a difference, because you're not telling the story through dialogue. That's a very common mistake which people make. And the other thing is, dialogue *emerges* from character, dialogue is not character. That's something I've learnt through my experience in the theatre. A lot of people, playwrights and even actors, make the same mistake. These are notes I've been giving the workshop students. Simple things. There's a tendency to put the dialogue in the forefront and the action in the background. But actually the dialogue emerges from the action. Actually it's not different from what experts mean when they talk about motivation. You know, what makes you say something? Which means that there is an action or a thought which has preceded an action or dialogue.

And again, action. The most important thing is action, whether it's physical or psychological. You've got to want to do something, and you're doing something. That's the dynamism of the theatre.

Madras Players' production of Dance Like a Mandirected And
by Mithran Devanesan the other

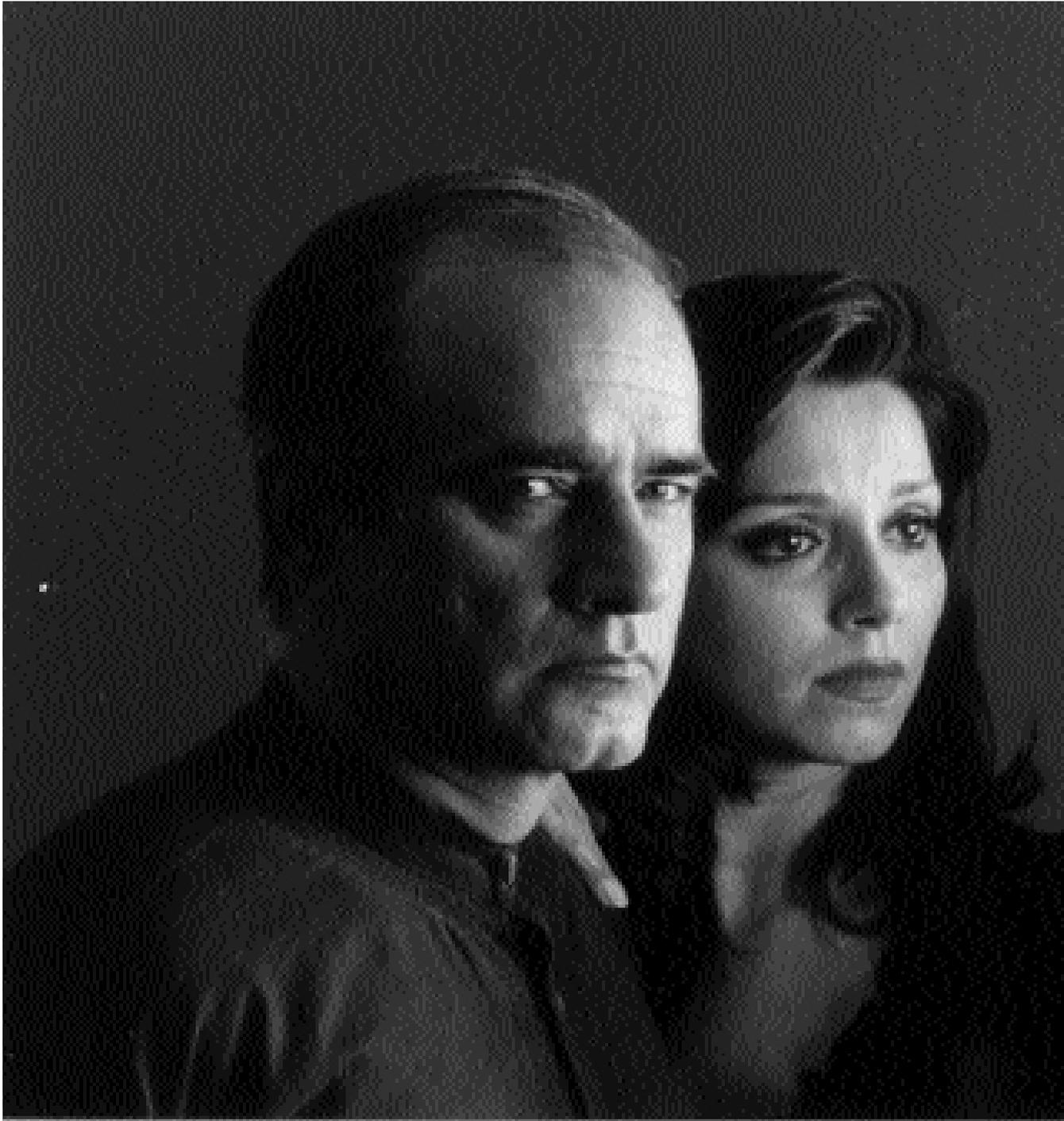
thing is, conflict and plot points. You know, like I'd said earlier—you pointed out that I've been influenced. But I think melodrama, good melodrama, is a very good way of understanding the craft of the machinery. You know, the difference between an over-the-top plot play and a character-driven play is that in the latter the plot points are not so visible. And you don't underline them in production. But the paradigm is the same. The paradigm doesn't



change. You still have your crisis, you still have your conflict, you still have your climax, and stuff like that.

Let's go back a little in time now, to after BLT.

Arjun Sajnani. A very well-known theatre director in Bangalore. Even in the 70s, he used to come up with these fabulous productions, where the sets were amazing. He's done *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Recently he did *Fire and Rain (Agni Aur Barkha)* in English, which was very well received. He used to do plays like *The Star Spangled Banner*, *Dial M for Murder*, that was one of his most successful plays. Again, I don't know, maybe my



Lillete Dubey's production of On a Muggy Night in Mumbai
Photo: Boman Irani

fascination with the detective genre. And *Dial M for Murder* is a classic in that genre. The plot points are so apparent, you know. Structurally, you just can't beat it. *Mousetrap* is nothing compared to it.

So watching his plays was important.

That's right, very important. Because he didn't stick to one genre. He did another play called *Tiger at the Gates* by Jean Anouilh, that has modern day language but is set in ancient Greece. It's about Helen of Troy and the futility of war. That was another unique experience. And I always liked the ones that were slightly challenging. I think that's why I liked *Tell Me the Name of a Flower*. For that time, for me as a child, it challenged me.

By challenge do you mean in terms of societal mores?

No, in terms of structure, in terms of form. You know, the shooting at a member of the audience, that was challenging from the point of view of form. That wasn't the first play I'd seen. I had seen earlier Gujarati plays. But that did something to me. I can't even remember the plays I had seen earlier.

The other person who influenced me was Ashok Mandanna. He was back from England. And he announced a workshop. I called him and he was very sweet, he called me over for tea and we had a lovely chat and he realized I was seriously interested in theatre. I joined his workshop and he did Charles Marowitz's *A Macbeth*. And that was an experience, the workshop was an experience.

You took part in it as an actor?

Yes, as an actor. He really helped me develop my voice. That was an intensive month-long workshop. In the 70s, around 1976-77. The one I'd done with Vijay was a one-week or a five-day workshop or something. Fairly basic, but it opened up a lot for me.

Those were good years here too, actually. 1974 to about 1980, a lot of activity in Calcutta, workshops and so on. Similar kinds of plays being tackled. In English.

That's interesting, that there were similar things happening here as well.

So what did you gain out of the workshop?

Voice training. Because I had given up on my voice. I was so frustrated by my voice that I thought, that's it, I can never be an actor. But he showed me that voices can be trained. And again group work was definitely the focus, along with improvisation, which was something that was introduced to me through Ashok's workshop.

So you seem to think of yourself more as an all-round theatre person than just a playwright.

Yes. I hate it when people say 'playwright Mahesh Dattani.' I would rather say 'dramatist'. I prefer that word. I've directed more plays that I've written. I've directed about twenty plays.

And do you enjoy acting as much as directing?

No, not so much. If I was given the choice, I would say I enjoy directing first, then writing. I enjoy acting the least.

But obviously training your voice and things were very important to you.

Yes, absolutely, because it gave me confidence and it helps, you know. Especially since I do actors' workshops as well. Now, of course, I've learnt a lot by reading and interacting and working with professional companies abroad. That has helped me the most, you know, working with, in, a professional set up. That's where I learnt the most.

And what were you reading all this time? Were there certain influences on you in terms of structure or playwrights?

No. I've never been much of a reader. And I still am not a very good reader. It's something I have to will myself to do, to read something, even today. I'm really not a reader at all. And at that stage, what had I read? Let me think, what's the first play script I read? I think it was Peter Ustinov, *Halfway up a Tree*. That's probably the first play script I read. And it was wonderful, it was challenging because this father becomes a hippie in the play. And everyone expects him to be the establishment. His son is rebelling against the establishment so he sees his father as the establishment. And he doesn't like this role so he decides to turn the tables and he becomes a hippie and lives in a tree, things like that. That was very funny. I liked that.

While reading a script, were you also taking note of structure and things the way you did when you saw a play?

No. I think it's only in the seeing that I understood structure. Not in the reading. In the

reading it was the story. And now, when I read *Halfway up a Tree*, I don't find it very challenging, because structurally it's very conventional, the typical living room kind of stuff. Nothing to it. Very good humour, though, Peter Ustinov. Fabulous humour.

So after Mandanna and that workshop, what would be the next milestone?

Kumarni Agashe.

That changed your life.

Ya, that changed my life, because I am a very shy person. I can't walk up to a person and say, I would like to meet you. But at that point I was moved enough to go back stage. And I spoke to Mr Shafi Inamdar and he told me that it was actually a Gujarati play. Even at that time I didn't connect that it was the same play, Madhu Rye's play. I checked the Prithvi bookstore. They had the Hindi version, which I got. I don't remember the translator, but *Kumar Ki Chhat Par* was the translation they used. The production had changed the title to *Neela Kamra*, because instead of the terrace they made it a blue room. And that was when I said that I want to do this in English. And I translated the play into English from Hindi. And at that time my business took me to Ahmedabad as well. So I found out who the Gujarati publishers were, and I managed to get a copy of the Gujarati play, *Kumarni Agashe*. That's when I realized it was Madhu Rye. And then I decided to translate it. And because I looked on Vijay [Padaki] as my mentor, I gave him the translation. And he smiled and he was very amused, and he said, I have already done a translation. He said that he'd received the permission of the author. And that was very frustrating, because I was very keen to do a production of my translation. By then I'd started my theatre group, Playpen.

Maybe I need to backtrack a little bit. I must go back to my directing, because that's how I began. I didn't begin with writing. One of my school mates, Bimal Desai, was very keen to start a theatre company, very keen to act. And he had this whole collection of Neil Simon scripts, of which he was very possessive. He loaned them to me to read, because he was very keen to do a Neil Simon play, and that was my introduction to Neil Simon. That fell through, but there were a whole lot of college students who were very keen to act. So we decided to do Woody Allen's *God*. We decided to do that because it was Woody Allen. It would go down well with colleges, it was funny and it had a large cast. So we had about twenty people and that was when I realized that people were actually listening to me. I was directing them! That was quite a turning point because suddenly I felt really empowered, being a director. And it was a huge success. We had three sold out shows at the Bal Bhawan, which seats about 500, because of the massive advertising we had done in colleges. The only way we advertised was through posters and pamphlets.

This was like setting up a repertory?

A theatre company.

A professional theatre company?

No, we wouldn't call it professional. I'm not so sure that we actually gave it a structure. It was just a group of us who wanted to do something. And we needed a name, so we chose Theatre Lab, we did *God* and that was a huge success. Because we were having fun. I directed it, I didn't act. And Bimal was superb in it. Everyone liked him, although he didn't play the lead. And it was funny, people were laughing, mostly youngsters, and because we had 25 young people involved in it, it was easy to sell tickets and things. If each person sells 20 tickets you've got a full house right there. So we had three full houses and we managed to get a review! That was something, our name in the papers, we were really walking tall. Then we did three more shows. By then the publicity and the acclaim had affected us, we all had massive egos and we thought that we were the greatest thing to have happened to theatre. Bimal and I had our differences, so we parted ways. And the next play I directed was Paul Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-*



*Lillete Dubey's production of Dance Like a Man
Photo: Asha Kochar*

the-moon Marigolds. And that I think was a major turning point as well. It was made into a movie. Paul Newman directed it. And it was about this embittered woman, whose husband's left her. She's got two daughters and one of them gets these hysterical fits. And the other one is this shy, retired girl who's involved in her science projects. She's working on some marigolds and some mutations. And the mutations are the mother and the two daughters, somehow they've been marginalized by society. I went to Arundhuti Raja, she was this major star. I wasn't too sure whether she would act for me. I left the script there and kept calling her. I really made a pest of myself. And finally she said, yes, I read the script and I love it. Yes, we must do it, you know. And I was on top of the world. We called a reading the very next day, this was for the Bangalore Little Theatre. Working on the play really changed my life because suddenly I was sensitive to women—the play has just five women in it. The play did go down very well.

Arundhati Raja was very encouraging, and she said that I would make a very good director.

Then I directed Jean Paul Sartre's *In Camera*, with Ashish Sen, who'd just moved to Bangalore from Calcutta. And that was, again, a success.

Did you ever feel like working with Gujarati theatre? Was it always English?

Yes, because in Bangalore, where can you do Gujarati theatre? There wasn't an amateur theatre. If there was . . . With my schooling and everything, I was already more comfortable with English than in Gujarati, because the only people I spoke to in Gujarati were my parents.

Do you remember writing your first play? What was that like, that experience?

Well, actually that came much later. No, no. Wait, I completely forgot to mention this short playlet that I wrote. It was just something that had struck me, something I read in some magazine. The whole business of greeting cards. So I thought I'd just write a play on that. I wrote a ten-minute piece called *Seasons Greetings*, where this husband and wife are sending out greeting cards to people whom they are not in touch with. It was not a very good play (*laughs*). I don't think I took it very seriously, because I wrote it in a day. I remember I had this portable Remington typewriter which my dad wasn't using—totally forgettable. I think my first piece of serious writing, if you can call it that, would be the translation of *Kumarni Agashe*. By then I was very sure that I wanted to be a director.

Somewhere along the way you started dancing, didn't you?

Yes, that's right. Did I skip that? Did I tell you about learning ballet? Well, I had this friend who just popped in one day, and said, look there's this lady who's teaching ballet, let's just go check it out. This was at the Alliance Francaise. There was this very stern looking English woman who looked at both of us and said, you're too old to begin. But she said she'd take us on. And then, I remember her first comment to me was that I had nice arm movements, but I had absolutely no strength in my legs. As it turned out my friend dropped out and I continued with her.

This was your introduction to any form of dancing?

Yes. And my first introduction to western classical music. Because she would play music from different ballets. I grew so fond of it. I used to look forward to it and work doubly hard. I was a scrawny guy who didn't have much grace or anything. And so I worked doubly hard at it and she was amazed at how much I picked up. I progressed quite a lot. I mean, relatively speaking. I wasn't a ballet dancer by any means. So that was something I did for four years.

Did any of that feed into your theatre work?

Yes, yes. Definitely, because I think I got a better sense of space through ballet. I would recommend ballet even today for my actors' workshops. It's great for stretching the muscles, for building them and understanding movement. Because, in ballet it's not moving from point to point—the movement itself is the frame. If you film the ballet dancer and you stop the frame, wherever their movement is, there would be a clean line. So it's not like Bharatnatyam where you get from point to point. So that really helped me a lot. You have all kind of movements. Darts and straight movements, circular movements, pirouettes and what not. So you really get a very good idea of space and accenting and going down and lunges and everything. It's a wonderful discipline. I would say that even Bharatnatyam dancers should do a bit of ballet.

Then what happened was, I saw a performance by Dr. Padma Subramaniam. She had done something called Bharatanrityam, focusing on technique and adding some stuff of her own. And I found that fascinating. She was this mountainous woman, but the minute she danced, she was brilliant. It was amazing, you wouldn't imagine that someone of her size could be such a powerful dancer. And suddenly the Bharatnatyam bug bit me. I



Lillete Dubey's production of On a Muggy Night in Mumbai
Photo: Boman Irani

wanted to learn Bharatnatyam, and I went to the Krishnaraos—U. S. Krishnarao and Chandrabhaga Devi. Incidentally, their granddaughter acted in the first production of *Dance Like a Man*. It's amazing, these connections, how they happen. And again it was a similar kind of thing, you know. They thought this convent educated guy can't be serious. So, I said, why don't you try me out. If you feel I can learn, take me on. So they gave me a private lesson. And then they said, okay, why don't you join. They had a beginners' class, all tiny tots, so I joined. I was still learning ballet then. But then within a year I gave up ballet.

The two dance forms really clashed. Because, number one, the accent for

Bharatnatyam is down. Whereas in ballet it's upward, the accent is in the air. That was the basic clash. And the posture also was, because in ballet you learn to tuck your bum in so that you have a straight back, whereas in Bharatnatyam you get a curve in your spine. So there are basic differences in posture.

So you gave up ballet as opposed to giving up Bharatnatyam?

I was just totally involved. By then I'd had the privilege of experiencing a performance by Sonal Mansingh. She was a student of the Krishnaraos, so she did a private performance. And I'd decided I wanted to take up Bharatnatyam. For some time I really thought of taking up dance seriously.

As a performer?

I'm not so sure whether that was the focus. After six years of training, I did do performances, I gave my dance debut, because my teachers insisted, which was a bad thing because I forgot some of the steps and it was a bit of a disaster. Protima Bedi was there. And later on, after we became friends, she said, aren't you that terrible dancer (*laughs*).

But did you ever feel a clash between your love for dancing and the theatre part of it?

No, no, I felt very much at ease doing both.

And what did you take into theatre from Bharatnatyam?

Again, a sense of rhythm. My sense of pace developed with Bharatnatyam, because there you go into three speeds. That's something you learn even before you learn an item. There are three speeds, it's built into the training period. So that really gave me a sense of pace.

You were saying ballet is excellent for actors, do you think Bharatnatyam is, too?

Yes it is. Because there is a precision, a geometry, in Bharatnatyam, which may or may not be useful to actors, but the discipline definitely is. And rhythm. The natya element is very much a part of Bharatnatyam—you have the nritya, the natya, and the abhinaya. And I think all of it, for projection, is wonderful. And that's where I think my spiritual growth also began, because the padams I was learning, even the varnam I was learning from them was about this connection with God, you know. And the text was in Telugu for one and old Kannada for another, so I had to translate it for myself. The essence of what it was, just devotion, the yearning for something exalted, of a higher order, I think that's something which is very good for an actor's spiritual growth. The only thing is, it takes years of training before you come to that stage. I don't think it's absolutely important, but I feel that it's valuable. Definitely.

What are the other milestones that come to mind?

Well, when I wrote my first play, *Where There's a Will*. By then my group had formed, and *The Deccan Herald*, which is the leading paper in Bangalore, invited me to take part in the Deccan Herald Theatre Festival. I didn't have a play. And that's when I thought of *Where There's a Will*. At that point I had this idea of a Gujarati family, a conflict between father and son and this scheming daughter-in-law. And a mistress as well. So I wrote about ten pages and I called my actors, and Ashish Sen and Munira, his wife, were there. And they read it, and they were laughing. And they said, why don't you complete it, we'll do this play. So I was encouraged by them, and we began rehearsals even before the play was completed. I just wrote the first scene within 10 days, not even the first act. As it turns out now, the first act has two scenes and the second act has two scenes as well. And the play became a major success. We took it to Bombay, performed at Prithvi Theatre again, and got a standing ovation. There were so many people coming backstage, people whom we didn't know, and saying, how wonderful to see something original, we're tired of adaptations, and sex comedies. All these wonderful old Parsi ladies saying, oh I'm going to call all my friends to come and see your play tomorrow.

So when you were writing that, were you thinking as a playwright, that I should write like this, and these are the values that I think should be in it, the dialogue, the form or . . .

Well, I was concerned about structure because I did want it to be different. I did want to break away from the expected. At the end of the first scene, the narrator, the father, dies, he has a heart attack and drops dead. And his ghost lingers on. He's laid out this elaborate will, so that even after he's dead, his family have to live according to his will. So that's where the play on the word comes in. And his mistress—she is the trustee of his property, his estate. And she is there to supervise, to see that his family lives according to his dictat.

So structure and humour, these were two things that were important right from the beginning.

That's true. Yes, absolutely. And, I think, the individual struggle. That's something which I had absorbed through *The Effect of Gamma Rays* and even *In Camera*. And again, you know, being so involved with, living in, Bangalore, doing Bharatnatyam and everything, all that did come into my plays. Because the next play I wrote was *Dance Like a Man*. And that's when I was still learning dance.

And as you said, the other thing that's remained consistent is the ensemble feel to your plays, as opposed to one single main character . . .

Yes, that's true. That's right. Like even my first play has five characters and all of them are important. There was enough space for each character to develop.

Your group, Playpen—

I call myself the artistic director and founder.

Do you feel that having a group influenced the way you thought about play writing?

Yes. Definitely so. Because I wasn't aware of all the politics the language throws up, you know, that writing in English—I wasn't that aware of my predecessors like Asif Currimbhoy and Gurcharan Das and Nissim Ezekiel and all that had happened in Bombay. I mean, I may have heard the names, but I didn't see myself as part of a political movement as such, and to me, Indian English is the natural thing. That's the only English I speak. And I don't see it as an issue at all. It is who I am.

So you feel that, because you've had a group, this became a non-issue for you?

Yes, absolutely, because I didn't have to sell myself—in fact, I wasn't writing for anyone else. I wrote because I had a group. It was more to feed the group that I began writing.

And once you began writing, did you take to the idea of yourself as a playwright?

Yes. It took *Dance Like a Man* to get me to think of myself seriously as a playwright. After two plays, that's when I took myself seriously. And maybe that was a mistake (*laughs*). Another milestone was meeting Alyque Padamsee. Because I think that was what really gave me the label of a playwright. We got rave reviews for *Dance Like a Man* in Bangalore. So we had the gumption to take it to Bombay. I just dashed off this letter to the NCPA [National Centre for the Performing Arts] with the reviews. Since we had such good reviews, they invited us to perform at the Experimental Theatre. And I decided we'd do two shows outside. Alyque and Sharon [Prabhakar] came to see the play. And I remember, I acted in it, so I had my dance costume on. I was in the green room after the play and there's this knock and somebody says, Alyque Padamsee wants to meet you. And I said, ya okay. I thought he was waiting in the foyer, but he was right there, backstage, and the minute I came out he was just full of praise and said, at last an Indian play in English! He said the dialogue was convincing and the characters were real. He invited the whole troupe to dinner. We started talking about theatre, really talked about the play in great detail. He asked a lot of questions. He asked whether I was thinking of writing anything else, and said, please keep in touch and promised to get in touch when

he was in Bangalore. The next time I went to Bombay, I called just to say hello, and he invited me over to dinner. And that's when he asked me, what have you got, what are you thinking of, what are you writing. By then I had the concept for *Tara* in my mind. I was a little unsure, because *Tara* is about these Siamese twins who are separated . . . I told him in a nutshell what it was about. He said, it sounds interesting, why don't you write it, send me the first draft because I may be interested I directing it. I thought, ah! here's God wanting to direct my play! A month later I got a call from his office to remind me about the play. It took me a little less than two months to write *Tara*, because I had God breathing down my neck!

Once you wrote it did you revise it at all?

Later, much later. The published version is revised. But after that Alyque invited me to Bombay for a reading. And there I did a bit of editing. There were some bits which he felt [unsure about] but the actors really liked and they said it would work. So he scheduled it. Then I said, look Alyque, I write because I want to direct, you know. He was a little unsure of what I was getting at. So I said, look, let me direct it in Bangalore and you can direct it in Bombay. He wasn't too pleased with the idea because he was keen to premiere it. But I said, okay, what we could do is, we could call my production a workshop production, and you could call yours the premiere. He agreed reluctantly. If he'd said no, I don't know what I would have done. Because I couldn't bear the thought that I'd written a play and was not directing it. That's why I wrote plays, because I wanted to direct. The only play I've written that I have not directed is *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*.

And are you planning to direct that?

I will, I think, after Lillete [Dubey] has done her run. Because I think it will go on for a while. So let's see. I would like to direct it.

When you write your plays, do you keep thinking about how you'll make them work on stage?

Absolutely. That's right, yes. Because I have this elaborate set design which I put into the beginning of the play, even in the published manuscripts. That's the way I talk about it first, you know. Of course other directors are free to do otherwise. It may sound a little silly, but the set has to speak to me; because the rest of it, the action, becomes very much a part of that set.

Do you start with the space. Do you ever start with a theme? I mean, when you decide you're going to write on something, is it because you see a visual image or is it because of the content?

The only play where the content came first was *On a Muggy Night*—no, even *Final Solutions*. The others were images or even sets. For *Dance Like a Man*, the thought of having Bharatnatyam on stage with dancers as characters came first. That's what I thought of, how it would look, how we're going to rehearse, what are the complications and things. So, you know, the images definitely spoke first. Then the set. And then the device came. In *Dance Like a Man*, there is this flashback structure where the same actors play different generations. The plot evolved out of that. And *Tara* was like reading a medical journal, but it was a metaphor for the male-female, conjoined, one whole, separated and then, you know, one preferred over the other. That's exactly how the theme came about in my mind.

What other milestones come to mind?

Tara. *Tara* was a milestone, because I feel that Alyque was the first person—no, that's not true. Actually, when we took *Dance Like a Man* to Bombay, I'd done a recce before the production to get some press publicity. And I'll never forget going to *The Times of India* office armed with photographs and reviews and the script and I asked to meet the Arts Editor. And it was none other than Ms Shanta Gokhale (*laughs*). I took a peek and saw

her there and I thought, my god, she looks intimidating with her salt and pepper hair. So I said, okay let's go for it. I have nothing to lose. So I entered and I introduced myself and I said that I had started writing plays. And she said, in English? I said, yes. And I said, well I've come to request you to give us some publicity. That's the way I said it. And there was this smile on her face and she said, we normally don't give publicity to new plays. I'll send someone to review it. And I said, look we're from Bangalore, and we're counting on the previews to get in our audiences because we can't afford ads. And she said, why don't you leave the script here and I'll think about it. So I said sure and I left the script. And then I went to the other press offices and after about three or four hours I went back to my hotel, and there were two messages from Shanta Gokhale. She had read the script in the mean time, and before I could call her, I got a call from a journalist saying, Shanta Gokhale has asked me to interview you. That was such a thrill. And you won't believe it, there was this huge half page preview and that's what brought people like Alyque and other people to see the play.

This is something we haven't yet discussed, but I think that the content of your plays challenges norms. Don't you think so? You're taking up issues and concerns—

That's true—

—and bringing them to life through individuals on a stage. The interaction is between human beings, but they're actually dealing with very solid issues.

That's true, yes.

Do you consciously do this? Are there certain things that are important to you that you feel you need to discuss?

Ya, definitely I'm talking about relationships in a changing society where the traditional values still have a place. A need for acceptance, and at the same time a need for rebellion, internal conflict where you want to be a rebel, but you also seek acceptance.

Where you don't want to reject the family or establishment, but want to be accepted for being different.

That's right. Again, I wouldn't say different, I would say, accepting those areas in oneself that are different. Maybe push the boundaries of what the establishment is. I think that is what it is. So it is not individual versus establishment, you know, I'm saying that the individual is the establishment, but sort of redefining what the establishment is. And I think it's like a civil war you fight from within. That's probably how I would put it.

So what are some of these areas that you've chosen to explore through this? Gender seems to be one.

Gender obviously is a major part of it. And I think it has to do with my own comfort with both the feminine and the masculine self in me. I think the masculine self is very content, it doesn't need to express itself. But the feminine self seems to seek expression, so now the focus is definitely on that and perhaps that is also why, in plays like *Bravely Fought the Queen*, I take up cudgels for women. In that sense it is fighting for my feminine self. And since I have the male self which is equipped to fight as well, it is a proportionate battle. The feminine self is not a victim in my plays. It's subsumed, yes, it's marginalized, but it fights back. Tara doesn't see herself as a victim, she fights back till the very end. It's only when she loses her relationship with her brother or her male self, that she wastes away. And the play ends with them sort of dissolved into the cosmos and then again in a cyclical sense finding union again.

Who are the other playwrights whom you really like the work of or respond to?

Tara obviously has some kind of influence of Tennessee Williams. Of the international playwrights, I think Tennessee Williams—his dramatic conventions are like poetry. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the menagerie, the glass, the frailty of the whole thing, it gets a poetic quality. You know, it's more like music. And at the same time in his own way he's

talking about the violence against the feminine—feminine expression. And amongst the Indian playwrights, to begin with it was Madhu Rye, as I've explained earlier. Then, later on, Vijay Tendulkar. And Mahesh Elkunchwar as well.

Again, playwrights who deal mostly with people who are coping with relationships, people trying to grow out of their limitations—

Absolutely. Yes, yes. That's right. Yes.

Is there anything you want to add to this, that you feel you should be talking about, that you feel is important to you, for understanding you and what you do?

Well, again, I would like to stress that I write for the theatre. I write to do plays. And I think that is probably where my strengths lie, because, I think, as productions they work. And the content is something—it's definitely a part of my world and what I see around and within me will definitely find its way into it. I think it's craft. Craft first and craft next. That's what theatre is about. And, you know, you could pick on the most simple of subjects. You could talk about a man wanting to cross a road—but you infuse that with dramatic strength, and it can be brilliant drama. You want to talk about my studio?

Yes, I was going to ask you about your studio. And does Playpen still exist?

Yes, it does. We did one play last year, which I didn't direct. Ashish Sen directed the play. We did a Pakistani play called *Come and See My City*. In English, that's the title. It's from the Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem, I don't know how it goes in Urdu, I've forgotten. But it's about, if you see my city from here, you cannot tell whether the colour red on the walls is that of blood or roses. He's talking about violence and beauty. The beauty of the city and the violence in the city, you know, with the same colour. So it's about violence in the cities. Although it's set in Karachi, it could well be Calcutta or Bombay or Bangalore.

The studio. Well, after all this hype about what I'm doing, suddenly I realized, I seem to be a kind of odd fish. Because people have labelled me an Indian English playwright, saying that I write about and for an English milieu, elitist, etc. etc. But this is not the way I see myself at all, you know. Which means, I really need to—again, what I do with my plays, what my characters do in their plays, where they sort of expand the establishment to belong in it. I think I'm doing that in the studio space, spawning talent and having playwrights and actors emerge to whom Indian English drama is not an issue. It's there, it's what you do, it's the norm. Any other kind of drama is the change of diet. So I guess, basically, that's why I built the studio. I did it with my own personal funds and some from my dad. I could never have done it without my dad's support, both moral and financial. It's been a huge success, I have to turn people away from my workshops.

So it's a centre out of which Playpen operates, and you hold workshops there, and performances . . .

That's right. We inaugurated the studio with a Khaled [Tyabji] performance. I think there's no institution in the country for playwrights. Because play writing in itself doesn't have much of a tradition. There may be playwrights, but there has never been a real movement. Look at the leftist movements. If you look at groups like IPTA, they did Brecht, they did adaptations of European plays. I'm sure they did original plays as well, but it never became a movement. The National School of Drama uses their repertory company to do so much. But what are they doing? The bulk of it is adaptations of plays, classics or European plays. So where are the new playwrights? We do have individual establishments like Karnad or Tendulkar or Elkunchwar or Badal Sircar, but we've never had a movement like, say, England had a movement of playwrights or America had its movement. And I'm sure other places had theirs. And unless that happens, we're not going to have a vibrant Indian theatre. And this is really the responsibility of the theatre companies. Whether it's the National School of Drama or Rangayan or the Bhopal Repertory or whatever, the minute you keep falling back on classics, you do a great disservice to your time. And I hope the studio in its small way can contribute by spawning

some kind of a movement of playwrights.

[Mahesh Dattani's plays include: *Where There's a Will*; *Dance Like a Man*; *Tara*; *Bravely Fought the Queen*; *Final Solutions*; *Do the Needful*; *On a Muggy Night in Mumbai*; and *Seven Steps Around the Fire*.]

From Keats was a Tuber

Poile Sengupta

ACT ONE

Stage in total darkness except for a single spot downstage right. A woman (about thirty-five) is seen addressing an unseen audience.

WOMAN: It is my privilege to speak to you as a teacher of English from India and to share with you, my thoughts and experiences. Thank you for inviting me to this forum, I am honoured.

Pause

English is not my language. It is not the language that my grandparents and parents speak at home. In fact, I do not think I knew anything of English before I went to school. But my parents, born when India was still a British colony, attributed the glory of the British to the power of their language and sent me when I was five, to a school run by Franciscan nuns. My fifth birthday calculated according to the ascension of my birthstar and celebrated at our family temple, was, or so I believed for a long time, my last birthday as an Indian.

Pause

English is now the language of my thoughts, it is the language of my reason, the language I use for loving. My perceptions are finer, my judgements more subtle, the range and depth of my emotions seem to be much greater in this language than in any other. What is it then, that I and all those like me have inherited? A language merely? A mode of communication that is functional in many, perhaps in most parts of the world? Or have we inherited an entire civilisation, an alien sensibility that has seduced us from the culture to which we were born? Have we been enchanted so as to wander forever homeless?

Spot Off

Scene I

The rest of the stage lights up, we see the shoddy staffroom of a provincial college. A large, ugly round table with curved legs dominates stage centre. The table is bare. The chairs are straight backed, uncomfortable, of irregular sizes, and placed randomly. There is a smaller rectangular table next to one of the chairs, also bare. Upstage left are two, high, steel shelf racks filled untidily with books, notebooks, ledgers, loose sheets of paper, a large box of chalk and a bottle of ink. There is a ray of light falling diagonally across the room, brilliantly lighting up whatever lies in its path and leaving other areas in semi darkness. The door to the staffroom is upstage left of centre. It is an old fashioned half door with two flaps that swing wildly and which cover only the middle of the door space. Consequently, the head and legs of anyone on the other side can be seen, the legs alone if it is someone short.

Mr. Iyer enters. He is tall, spare but vital, in his late forties, dressed formally in a light suit and tie, carries a leather case which he places on the round table, then notices something on the floor, picks it up. It is a rectangular piece of polished wood, with the words 'Eng. Dept.' painted on it in white. It has obviously fallen down or been knocked down from outside the door. Mr Iyer runs his right palm across it and places it carefully on one of the shelves.

A bell is heard clanging.

Enter Miss Sarala in an almighty hurry. She is about twenty seven, wears a shimmery sari, a

fussy embroidered blouse with long sleeves, a good deal of gold jewellery, she has a large red dot on her forehead, flowers in her hair and carries a cloth bag stuffed with books. She goes up to one of the shelves and hunts for something.

IYER: Is it your attendance register that you are looking for Sarala?

SARALA: Oh! Yes. Yes sir. I was finding it but . . .

IYER (*gently*): You mean you were looking for it but couldn't find it . . . I believe all the attendance registers have been taken to the office for calculating the students' attendance records. Were you not aware of this?

SARALA: Yes. Oh yes, yes. Mrs. Nathan told me. But I just forgot. So many things that I have to remember. And doing detailed plus non detailed this year, I . . .

IYER: Do you find your work load too heavy Sarala? Would you like me to speak to Mrs. Nathan about it?

SARALA: Sir? No Sir. I . . . so grateful . . . I . . . If I ask you sometimes, some passages that you can explain...with your experience and knowledge then . . .

IYER (*withdraws slightly. Opens his case and takes out a notebook*): Certainly. But if you are meeting the Commerce section for the first hour, you should be on your way. You are already five minutes behind.

SARALA: Oh yes! Yes sir! (*looks into her bag, pulls out a couple of dogeared books, goes up to the door, hesitates, then returns to get some chalk*) Sir! That book you gave me, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, her poetry, it is so beautiful sir. So much . . . so much emotion . . . so much . . . (*pause*) . . . emotion . . .

Silence

SARALA: I should go sir. The students must be . . . (*goes towards door and almost collides with Mrs. Nathan who is entering*) Oh! I am so sorry. Really sorry. I was going to class . . .

NATHAN: Late. Always late Sarala. Even after three years of being a lecturer.

SARALA: It was just that I did not get a bus and . . .

NATHAN: Then you should start early. What kind of example are you setting the students?

SARALA: I am sorry. I . . . (*exits quickly*)

Silence. Iyer is writing meticulously into the notebook. Nathan sits at the smaller table and places her handbag and books on it. She is a small made woman, about forty five. Her white sari is very crisp, her white blouse and bare forehead proclaim her widowed state. She wears no jewellery except for a thin gold chain around her neck and two bangles on her left arm. She notices the name board on the shelf.

NATHAN: I find the board has fallen off yet again.

IYER (*not looking up*): Yes.

NATHAN: Have you told Ramanan?

IYER: No. Not yet.

Nathan goes to door and looks out

NATHAN: Ramanan! Ramanan! Not here as usual. (*Signals to someone outside*) You. Yes you. B. Com first year, aren't you? Yes. You know our peon Ramanan? Yes. Ask him to come here immediately. To the English department. Hurry up. (*returns to table*) He should have at least cleaned the room. Look at the dust here . . . Tcha! . . . (*a long pause*) We are getting somebody in Mrs. Kichu's place. (*she has got his attention at last*)

IYER: For a mere three months?

NATHAN: It may be a mere three months but there is enough work. You cannot expect me to handle all her classes in addition to my own.

IYER: That is not what I was suggesting.

NATHAN: And you think Sarala can take both the first year and the third year, that too the B.A.s? As it is, she keeps grumbling about the timetable she has. As for Dr. Dennis...

IYER: When is this lady coming?

NATHAN: Who? The leave vacancy? . . . (*laughs in a rather metallic way*) What makes you think it is a woman? (*Iyer does not respond*) I suppose you think that only a silly woman would . . .

Enter Ramanan, a bustling but generally ineffectual middle aged man. He cannot speak but can hear perfectly well. He wears a khaki uniform, large, baggy shorts and an ill fitting jacket and has a large untidy smear of holy ash across his forehead. He goes up to Iyer, greets him and then stands to attention facing Mrs Nathan.

NATHAN: So there you are Ramanan. Where were you if I may ask? (*Ramanan gestures*) In the office, is it? They are still cutting your salary? Alright. Alright. Since that daily ritual is over, you can do some work now . . . The board has been taken off again.

Ramanan darts to the shelf, picks up the board, goes out and darts back again. He thumps the board and gestures violently

IYER : I agree. Somebody seems to have knocked it down deliberately. One of the nails is bent.

NATHAN: I have got sick and tired of this nonsense. First they spray ink on it, then they draw obscene pictures, now . . . (*stands up*) Ramanan. Give me that board. I will take it to the office and fling it in their faces. We don't need it.

Ramanan does not move

NATHAN: Give it, I say.

Ramanan looks at Iyer

IYER: Perhaps we should not admit defeat that easily.

Silence. Mrs. Nathan does not speak, then after a moment, she sits down again. Ramanan smiles, evidently with relief, touches his forehead to Iyer and exits

Silence. Then . . .

IYER: This addition to the staff. When does he join?

NATHAN: Tomorrow.

IYER: Tomorrow?

NATHAN: Yes.

IYER: The arrangements seem to have been made more quickly than I would have thought possible.

NATHAN: Yes.

IYER: I presume you did not think it fit to inform your colleagues of your decision.

NATHAN: What do you expect me to do? Call a departmental meeting every time I sneeze? Why should I consult my colleagues for every small thing? . . .

IYER: That is the usual procedure for a new appointment.

NATHAN: Well, in this case, I felt I could take a decision on my own. I talked to the University before Mrs. Kichu went on leave, they approved of the

candidate, they . . .

IYER: You are acquainted with the candidate, I gather.

NATHAN: Yes. I know him. He is a sort of distant nephew. (*defiantly*) In fact, he is my only sister's only son.

IYER: I see.

NATHAN: What do you see? Tell me, what do you see? You don't have a family, you don't have any obligations, family obligations, you have no idea what it means to have to . . .

Pause

NATHAN: He will be very good for the Department, let me tell you. In fact, we should feel privileged that he is coming here at all. He is an M.A. first class first.

IYER: Is there any particular reason that he should want to work in a college such as ours? In a small, out of the way town and for a mere three months?

NATHAN: He has applied to a Canadian University for his PhD. and he is waiting for their reply. In between, he thought he could get some work experience.

IYER: I see. He seems to be an exceptionally . . .

NATHAN: Oh yes. He is very exceptional. Right from the time he was a child. I am not saying this because he is my nephew but he is very, very intelligent. My brother in law wanted him to go for the I.A.S. but you know this younger generation has its own ideas. The boy decided that he wants to stay in the teaching business.

Pause

IYER: You misunderstand. I was about to say that your nephew is exceptionally fortunate.

Pause

NATHAN: Then let me tell you something Mr. Iyer. He is capable of teaching even us, all of us in the department. He has read the latest English Literature books. He will be like a new wind that sweeps us clean.

IYER: I believe it is usually a new broom that performs that function.

NATHAN: A broom, a wind, a ventilator. What does it matter? At least we will have a new face to see and a . . .

Enter Dr. Dennis. He is dressed in rusty black trousers, a black coat and could be mistaken for a small time lawyer. He is, even at this time of the morning, very slightly inebriated.

DENNIS: What is this about a new face? Let me not to the marriage of new faces admit impediments . . .

NATHAN: My nephew is joining the staff.

DENNIS: Ah! Prepare to meet thy doom. Beware, beware his flashing eyes, his flowing hair . . . How long do you think he will survive in our little Hades?

NATHAN: He will be here for three months and I hope, Dr. Dennis that you will not make him regret coming to us.

DENNIS: Mrs. Nathan, you wound me. You do me grievous injury. Does she not Iyer? . . . Iyer? . . . Iyer is into higher things. Let us sit on the ground Nathan and talk instead of the death of the English Department . . . the . . .

NATHAN: Dr. Dennis, the floor is very dirty. Please get up and get ready for your class.

DENNIS: Ah yes. Class. Fifty five empty vessels to be filled with immortal longings. Must I go or shall I stay . . . Which is to be oh Queen who walks in such authority, which is it to . . .

Ramanan rushes in with a broom, very excited. He gestures violently as usual

DENNIS: Our Feste has festered further. I cannot comprehend his communication though it is rivetting.

NATHAN: What are you saying Ramanan? I can't make out anything at all. Really this is too much.

IYER: It seems a stranger has arrived with a suitcase and is at the moment, in the Principal's chambers, inquiring for you Mrs.Nathan.

NATHAN: For me? Who could it be? Don't tell me it is . . .

IYER: Your nephew?

NATHAN: But he was supposed to come only tomorrow. Why is here today itself? This is very strange. Ramanan are you sure he was asking for me? Or did you just hear half of what was going on and . . .

IYER: Mrs. Nathan, please compose yourself. May I suggest that you step across and welcome your nephew on our behalf.

NATHAN: But he told me he was taking the Mail . . . he must have . . . excuse me . . . I must go . . .

Enter Raghu Krishnan. He is about twenty five, but looks younger and with the kind of freshness that some men retain all their lives. The uncharitable would call him immature, childish, but a kinder judgement would be that he seems to carry about him the conviction and the excitement that he has been born to change the world. He does not look upon others with scorn, nevertheless, he thinks himself superior. He is dressed in ethnic clothes, kurta-pyjamas, slippers and has evidently had a tiring journey.

RAGHU: Ah! English voices, at last. Thought I would never get here.

NATHAN: Raghu! I thought you were arriving tomorrow.

RAGHU: But I'm here today! . . . Surprise! . . . Isn't that just like me? So this is your Department. And you must be Mr. Iyer . . . Dr.Dennis, I presume, *(he gets it right)* and this is Ramanan . . . I am Krishnan. *(the men shake hands, including Ramanan)*

NATHAN: Ramanan, why are you standing there like a fool? Put the suitcase in a corner, turn the fan on faster. Raghu, you want some water or something . . . you must be so hungry. I have the next hour otherwise . . . I wanted to put in a day's casual leave tomorrow . . .

IYER: Mrs.Nathan, I was about to suggest that Ramanan escort Mr. Krishnan to your rooms where he could wash and change.

NATHAN: I was going to say exactly that. Raghu, here are my keys. My quarters are nearby, in the same compound actually. There is some food in the kitchen and . . .

RAGHU: Dr.Dennis, you haven't said a word to me. Are you being superior or is it something else?

DENNIS: Superior! Why should I be superior? It is the east and you are the sun.

RAGHU: In other words, I look too young. Mr. Iyer, is that what you think too?

NATHAN: Don't be silly Raghu. Nobody thinks anything. Come now, go with Ramanan. He will take you to . . .

A gong is heard

NATHAN: Oh my God! I have to go. Raghu, will you be alright? Otherwise I will give the class some written work and . . .

RAGHU: Well, Mr. Iyer?

IYER (*smiling*): We are barely acquainted, Mr. Krishnan.

RAGHU (*laughing*): Acquainted! Haven't heard the word for a century. Acquainted. A quaint word! A Trollope word. Do you read a lot of Trollope Mr. Iyer?

NATHAN: Raghu, I have to go and Ramanan is waiting. Please . . .

IYER: Trollope is a writer with style and wisdom.

RAGHU: But nobody in their right senses reads him any more Mr. Iyer. He has not been in a University syllabus for God knows how long. Do you read Trollope too Dr. D?

NATHAN: Raghu! I . . .

Enter Sarala, breathlessly

SARALA: Mrs. Nathan! Your class is waiting. One of them asked me if . . . Oh!

RAGHU: Ms. Sarala! Hello ! I am your obedient servant...Oh no! I've caught the Trollope virus . . . Sarala, I am Raghu, your new colleague.

SARALA: But nobody told me that . . .

RAGHU: You have a new colleague? Now you do. Happy?

Mrs. Nathan has been talking to Ramanan and now hands him her keys and what seems to be some money as well

NATHAN: Raghu, I'm leaving the keys with Ramanan. He will take you when you are ready. I have to go. Dr. Dennis, you have a class also, don't you? And Sarala, didn't you want to go the library? You wanted to look up something on . . .

SARALA: But that was last week, Mrs. Nathan. I told you I could not find anything.

NATHAN: Our library is so useless. Dr. Dennis, shall we go?

Dr. Dennis gets up and goes to the door. Mrs. Nathan is reluctant to leave

NATHAN: Raghu, I wish you would . . .

There is no response from Raghu. Mrs. Nathan and Dr. Dennis exit

RAGHU: I find that amazing, really amazing. Does he do this everyday?

Iyer does not respond

SARALA: What Mr. Raghu?

RAGHU: Raghu.

Sarala: Huh?

Raghu: Just call me Raghu. I was wondering about Dr. D . . . Dr. Dennis. Does he always go to class without books?

Sarala: Oh Dr. Dennis! He is very senior. He has been a lecturer for twenty, twenty one years.

Raghu: So he knows all his stuff is it?

Sarala: The syllabus is the same you know. It has not changed for so many years. Dr. Dennis. . . . he has all the notes from those days itself. . . . he is a very good lecturer.

Raghu: And you Sarala?

Sarala: What?

Raghu: Are you a good lecturer too?

Sarala: I don't know . . . I can't make out . . . I . . .

Enter Ramanan gesticulating

Sarala: What Ramanan? You want to know . . . what . . . ?

Iyer (*abruptly*): Ramanan wants to know whether Mr. Krishnan is ready to be escorted to his aunt's rooms.

Sarala: Aunt?

Raghu: Mrs. Nathan. Sorry Mr. Iyer, I realise I offend you by not being clean and wholesome. I'm coming Ramanan. Just one minute okay?

Ramanan grins and exits. Raghu stands up to go

SARALA (*stands up too, frightened*): You are Mrs. Nathan's nephew?

RAGHU: Didn't you realise that? She was behaving so avuncular or auntuncular, if you like.

SARALA: Her only nephew?

RAGHU: As far as I know, yes. Why?

SARALA: But you . . . she told me you . . .

RAGHU (*no longer flippant*): Told you what? What has my aunt been saying?

SARALA: Nothing. Nothing. Just . . .

RAGHU (*angry*): What has that woman been babbling?

Iyer stands up

Iyer: Mr. Krishnan!

Sarala: I told you . . . it's nothing . . . I . . .

There's a tap at the door and Damini, a young girl enters. She carries a pile of books and is obviously a student but entirely self possessed. She walks straight up to Mr Iyer without glancing around her. Raghu switches his attention completely from Sarala to Damini.

DAMINI: I'm sorry I'm late Sir. I had to return some books to the library. Where shall I sit?

IYER: Who asked you to come in here?

DAMINI: You asked me to Sir. You said this was the quietest place in the college for any kind of intellectual discussion.

IYER: Yes. Of course. But that was last week, if I remember right.

DAMINI: Yes sir.

IYER: Pick up your books.

DAMINI: Sir?

IYER: Let us go and look for an empty classroom. Aren't some of those smaller rooms free at this time?

DAMINI: We had to cancel last week's discussion Sir because we could not find any place.

IYER: Nevertheless, we shall search again. Come on.

Iyer opens the door for Damini and follows her out

RAGHU (*sits down again*): Who was that?

SARALA (*standing well away from him*): What?

RAGHU: That . . . that girl. Who is she?

SARALA: Damini? She is in third year B.A.

RAGHU: Is she the only student in third year B.A.?

SARALA: Of course not. I think there are sixty two or sixty three students.

Raghu whistles in amazement

SARALA: There are seventy students in my class, in first year.

RAGHU: But this girl . . . Is she being given some special coaching or something?

SARALA: Damini? No, not special coaching like that. She is doing Elective English third year.

RAGHU: Oh, I see. That's interesting.

SARALA: Yes.

RAGHU (*suddenly switching his attention back*): Hey! You are upset with me. I shouted at you. I'm sorry. I really am.

Silence

RAGHU (*going up, taking her by the hand*): Look Sarala . . . may I call you Sarala please?

SARALA (*disengages her hand*): You called me Sarala from the very first minute you saw me.

RAGHU: Ah! And do you know why? Do you realise why I called you by your name almost at once? No? Because . . . because Sarala . . .

Enter Mrs. Nathan

NATHAN: Raghu! You are still here? . . . What are you doing?

RAGHU: I was merely talking to Sarala. What have you said to frighten the poor girl? Your usual hair raising gossip?

NATHAN: Sarala!

RAGHU: No. No. Sarala has said nothing. She looks at me with total terror that's all.

NATHAN: Raghu! I warned you. If you want to work here, you have to observe certain rules and regulations. Mr. Iyer . . .

RAGHU: That same tune! I heard it throughout the summer. Mr. Iyer this. . . . Mr. Iyer that . . .

SARALA: Please don't say anything against Mr. Iyer.

RAGHU: Oh so you are in the club too!

NATHAN: Raghu! I have got you this appointment after a lot of effort. Just for you to escape from . . .

RAGHU: I did not want to escape! Or even need to! It is all something that you and your sister have created.

NATHAN: Your mother asked me . . . begged me . . . to get you this post. I went out of my way for you . . . But this not the place to discuss such things.

RAGHU: So now I have to behave myself.

Silence

RAGHU: Miss Sarala, what did my aunt say about me?

SARALA: She . . .

RAGHU: Yes?

SARALA (*suddenly*): Why don't you ask her herself? I have to go to the library.

Sarala picks up some books randomly and exits

RAGHU: She is really scared of me, isn't she?

NATHAN: She is an unmarried girl Raghu. She has lived in this small town all her life. She has not seen or even heard of anyone like you.

RAGHU: And now because of whatever you have told her, she won't even look at me. What does she think I'll do? Throw her down and rape her?

Enter Iyer. He stands at the door

IYER: Mrs. Nathan! I thought you had a class.

NATHAN: Oh! Yes. Yes, I do have a class. I gave them some work and came. I wanted to see if Raghu was . . .

IYER: Ramanan has been waiting for some while. And I would be grateful if I could have the staffroom . . .

NATHAN: Damini! Oh, I am so sorry Mr. Iyer. You told me last week. Raghu! You have to go. Come on.

(Raghu shrugs his shoulders and saunters out while Iyer holds the door open. Mrs. Nathan follows Raghu out)

Extracted from Keats was a Tuber by Poile Sengupta, scheduled to be published by Seagull Books, Calcutta. Poile Sengupta, based in Bangalore, has been a teacher, writer for children, poet, columnist and playwright.

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From Women in Black

A One-Act Play

Bubbles Sabharwal

The play opens on a dark stage. A window behind the kitchen down stage right is lit and immediately an emergency (ambulance) siren is heard and the confused sounds of a hospital O.P.D. Two figures in white jackets are silhouetted against the window briefly and are saying Shivani . . . Sanjay . . . An accident . . . a cacophony of sounds. Simultaneously from right of stage a phone sound is heard. The light fades on the couple, they vanish and the ambulance siren merges into a strident phone ring, which merges into an alarm clock going off. Light shifts to the bed on the right of stage. Shivani reaches out her right hand from under the pillow and shoves the alarm into the bedside drawer. The phone keeps ringing. It's 6 p. m. in the evening. She turns, picks up the phone with her left hand and drops it back in its cradle, cursing, pillow on her head. Phone is persistent but the ambulance sound tapers off. She slides her hand out of the pillow and grabs the phone.

SHIVANI (*confused, sleepy*): Hello! Hello? Doctor? (*sits bolt upright*) Oh God, Sanjiv, it's you. I had an awful dream, a hospital . . . (*broken*) two doctors and that siren. Listen I have this premonition—can we meet earlier for a coffee—I have a bad feeling that won't go away (*rubs her back on the pillow and vanishes under the sheet*).

She listens, and her mood changes, swings her legs off the bed

No! definitely not! No damn five minute coffee breaks! What's the point, Sanjiv? (*Looks for her cigarette as he continues placating her; lights her cigarette, it won't light*) No! I can't talk at work I just can't—the studio is full of technicians and that damn inquisitive Das—it's so bloody noisy and you know it (*lights her cigarette*) once you get there it's like a conveyor belt you can't get off! (*She inhales, listens to him*). Sanjiv, cut the crap, are we going with Renu and Ajay to the Djinhs or not? (*She inhales nervously, throws her feet over the bed, running her hand tiredly over her head as she listens to him, and head comes down dejectedly*) Oh! I see . . . well I guess a second birthday is a big event. Even the papas have to be good boys, right? Well, if you have to you have to (*stares at her cigarette viciously, slips on her chappals from under the bed*). I'm not making a scene. I am not! You called me, remember? (*Searching for her tablets on her table, bends, listening to him*) What do you want me to bring? The 'Economic Times' of the 14th (*her tablets in hand, she swallows them, and as she stands up she catches sight of her dishevelled, unkempt self in the mirror opposite, she stares at herself*). Yes. Okay, we'll meet for the briefing at 7.30 pm . . . anything else? (*Distracted, stares at the mirror, takes off her hairband, and is about to hang up on him, rethinking her whole life.*) What? Black?! Absolutely bloody not! You know I hate black!! I-am-not—making—a—SCENE! (*She bangs the phone down and keeps staring at the mirror, stares at the coat rack with a black trouser suit draped across it, runs a hand across her face, looks at her ringless finger and is near tears.*)

Phone goes again, she thinks it's Sanjiv trying to make up and grabs the remote

Oh Sanjiv, I didn't mean—(*Listens to her friend Nalini's voice*) Oh! Hi, Nalini, I? No! I was just speaking to Sanjiv about this evening newspot for I.T.V.—heavens, Nalini, not you, too! He's just a friend, O-K-A-Y? (*Flings her pillow across the room*). Will you stop mothering me, you women have babies and slip into mothering everyone—your servant, doctors, husbands, bank

managers, friends . . . I have one mother! I don't need another, what I need is a friend! *(As she listens to Nalini she goes to the coffeemaker by her bed and discovers it's cold)* No, it's not him! It's me *(she drags her sheet off the bed, screws it up and throws it on the ground)*. It's me! It's not us! There is no us! It's actually this stupid coffeemaker that's bugging me, it's not working. Nothing works! *(Kicks the sheet)* I sound it, do I? Well, I am fed-up! And I am not shouting *(she takes her bedside drawer and throws it on the floor)* I am CALM! I am bloody CALM! *(Kicking her drawer viciously under the bed)* It's only my LIFE I HATE! *(She listens to Nalini and suddenly gets a grip on herself)* Sorry Nals—I'm being awful, a spoiled brat. I need a cup of coffee and a life in that order! If your son Dushiant saw me he'd kick me! *(She moves towards the kitchen)* He said M-A-S-I, how cute! I must come and see him soon *(she gets calmer, goes back for her cigarette and moves around the bed towards the kitchen)*. Okay, I'll drop by later tonight after the show—lateish, Nalini . . . no! No, just keep the fish curry and the *methi paratha* *(she puts the kettle on, filling it)*, you know I always remember mama when you make that *(she sits cross legged on the kitchen chair and plays with her lighter, staring into space, into her childhood)*. You know, Nals, it's been two years since I've been back to Poona—perhaps it's time to visit mama and papa now. Remember the time we met, Nals? I had just come from Poona with that awful haircut! Yuck! And I thought Delhi was the City of Dreams, and how you laughed . . . uh . . . huh . . . I do remember that! Remember when we went to buy my fridge, Nalini? And we landed up buying kilos and kilos of *methi* to fill it up with—I wanted to freeze *methi*, remember? *(Laughs, looks beautiful—abruptly she changes the subject)* Nalini, you are happy, aren't you? I mean, Vinay is a real good husband, isn't he? *(The water boils and she runs to turn the gas off, squeezes the tea bag . . .)* I know it's a real tearjerker question—I'm a jerk! *(Burns her finger, as she squeezes the tea bag)* You know me, Nalini I am fond of him, and Vinay's one guy who never asks stupid questions *(sits with her tea)*; his company party?! Where?! *(Examines her arms . . . the pores)* Well, why not? I have nothing else lined up for Saturday and seeing as I'm waxed, exfoliated, manicured, pedicured, cleaned, cleansed *(pirouettes)*, I may as well have a destination to head towards! *(Laughs, has her tea and pulls out a stack of newspapers)* Okay, Nals, I'll see you later—it's yes for Saturday! Who, me? I'm fine now, thanks! *(Listens to her friend)* Okay, I will get something to eat, I am FINE! I am not covering up . . . listen, lady, I'm near thirty—nowhere near the brink, I am in control, I have a great job and I have a great friend and . . . I'm going places, now get off my back! Bye! *(Pushes her cup away, unfolds the newspaper)* Who the hell is Priya? Nalini, listen—thus far this flat is my territory—mine! When I want a flatmate I'll ask you—now stop mothering me! See you . . . listen I still have to iron this damn trouser suit! Get off! Bye!

Gets up to make a second cup of tea and turns on the radio. An old song plays, 'When a man loves a woman'. Feels sort of sad and gets distracted, she's come to this big city in search of a big dream, but it's misplaced somewhere. Chucks her teacup in the sink and picks up a tweezer to do her eyebrows and stares at the handmirror . . . hating what she sees . . . speaks to herself . . .

There is something wrong and it's with you. Why do you always pull the trigger on yourself? Nalini is a good girl, Sanjiv is a bad man, mama is a good girl, papa is . . . *(phone rings, she rests against the windowsill)* Hello! Hello! Damn blank calls! Bunch of window gawking perverts *(barely goes back to her eyebrows when the phone goes again . . .)*

Hello, pervert *(shouts)*. Oh! Hi mama! Ma, is it you? *(At once softens)* Ma, I've

been remembering you, how does it matter who calls, ma? (*Leans on the kitchen counter*) I really have been thinking of you—I'm good, ma, and you and papa? (*Listens, light catches her in silhouette and she plays with her housecoat button, childlike*) Me? I'm in the kitchen, actually cooking, ma! *Methi paratha*, of course, you know how I love them! I've got so fat I could drop with my weight. (*Opens her fridge*) I do love cooking, mama (*her fridge has a carton of stale milk, dried figs, old apples, mildewed lettuce, orange juice, biscuits, white tomatoes and cauliflower stems*). I went out vegetable shopping yesterday and bought fresh cauliflower (*pulls out the old stems*) blood-red ripe tomatoes and peas (*takes out the white tomato, pulls the trash can out and trashes it*); and the milk here is so fresh, ma, so wholesome, I drink gallons of it (*looks at the carton, empties it in the sink and trashes it*). Remember you said eat fruits—ma I have loads of fruit growing in the fridge (*dried apples come out and the trash can is used again*). The fruit in Delhi is so fresh, unlike Poona, of course onions and tomatoes are expensive but everything here is so healthy and wholesome (*holds up a dried apple to the light; listens to her mother worry about her*). I miss you, mama (*whispers, her mother can't hear*) I said . . . I said (*she chucks the apple in the trash can and gathers the crumbs off the table top*) I said I am doing very well now—I am doing the prime time newspot with Sanjay Tandon—the same! Yes he's quite a nice man, actually ma . . . every weekend at 9 p.m. Who? Mrs. Sajnani, huh? Well, now you can tell her your daughter's on TV too, and tell her I'm damn well paid! I'll never forget how she treated me at that wedding (*opens the fridge to do more damage and out comes an old cabbage*). Well, now that precious daughter of hers is in Ludhiana and yours is in Delhi (*takes a knife off the side of the fridge*). Tell her and that awful Mrs. Muniya that I'm on TV, I'm in Delhi, I earn a six figure salary, live in a four figure studio apartment, with silk furnishing and brocade upholstery and I'm going places—(*shreds the cabbage to bits viciously*). I am going up, up, up. While her daughter's going fat, fat, fat raising pockmarked kids on that chicken farm of hers, getting a hormonal imbalance! (*Slides the trashcan out. Her mother scolds her, as all mothers do, bringing her back to earth. Her false sense of security, identity are in jeopardy and the trash can is filling up . . .*) Yes, mama, I know that, but why should the world . . . (*sinks to the kitchen floor, lights a cigarette*) why are you the only forgiving good soul on earth? (*She's calmer, the kitchen like the bedroom resembles a battlefield*) She never liked you, ma, she always lorded it over you (*tips her bag over looking for a light; the cigarette's gone out*). She never liked the way you cooked, the way you made *methi parathas*! The old bag only filled it with *atta*—why didn't you give her a mouthful? You take too much from everyone! (*Knocking the lighter that is not working, fumbles in her bag*). Stop being so giving (*out falls a picture of Sanjiv and the cigarette lies forgotten, distracted*). I know there is a God up there, but why does he test only us? Okay! I didn't mean it! (*Looks heavenward, scrutinizes the snapshot, kicks the rest of the bag's contents under the table and picks stuff she wants to lay out on the table like a drill*). Okay, mama I'll answer that question if you answer one of mine—honesty for honesty, right? (*Sorts out all the sharp objects from her bag, tweezers, nailcutter, cuticle peeler, photographs, and lays them out like solitaire on the tabletop*) You want the truth? (*She picks up the tweezer, hand poised in mid-air*) Yes, I do think of marriage, on and off, I do (*picks up Sanjiv's picture with the tweezer, holding it aloft*) but I'm so busy, I have little time to think—I think on the job! (*Laughs at her joke, whilst she's taken the picture to the gas stove to burn it*). But I will meet someone in Delhi, that's the reason you wanted me to come here, right? To meet Mr. Right (*bends to blow ashes across the picture on the stove!*) Yes, Nalini is looking around, ma, she's my official husband-hunting agent. She's

even taking me for a fancy ANZ Company party on Saturday—Oh! No! No! Moving back with Mala Aunty—absolutely not! She’s shown me her wardrobe of suitors (*holds up a nailcutter and flips it open sharp side up*). There was Sunil Kukreja from the Chartered Accountant firm, a round man with round spectacles and a round mouth, a complete zero in every way. (*Mimes a round mouthed suitor, snaps the cutter in half and chucks it in the trash can, then goes for a slim torch*). Then came Navroze Bottlewallah, the advertising whiz with the deep lines, deep attitude, deep eyes, deep voice—he wanted to meet me deep in his terri—tory (*she bends like a commando in the jungle, covering tracks and flings the torch, aiming it into the trash can*) Ao! You have to listen, ma, don’t laugh, the best was the management pundit Manohar M.B. Joshi, he said call me M.M.B everyone calls me M.M.B. (*She whips out a tampon and uses it as a cigar*) and tell me, are you a cyber-ick? What the hell is a cyber-ick. I asked stupidly? Hey it’s ICK—Internet for Kicks! Are you on the kid’s yahoo line? Gross man! I hated him—pretentious and abbreviated! Mama, I’m not complaining—I’m stating (*She chucks the whole table’s contents in the can, as her mother scolds her again, reminding her she’s no great looker. She moves away from the kitchen fed up, towards the drawing room and catches her reflection in the mirror, looks at the trouser suit on the stand*). I’m telling you I’m happy the way I am—I have a great job, a great apartment, a great (*walks behind the coat rack so all you see is her face behind the suit*) flatmate. Didn’t I mention Priya, mum? Nalini’s sister’s friend. You’ll like her, mama, she’s not like me, she’s strong, aggressive and speaks her mind—(*puts on the black jacket*). She’s the one who’s done up this apartment with burnt black upholstery and blood red cushions (*putting on red lipstick, staring into the audience, mesmerized*) and the smoke gray drapes, they are the colours of this season, mama, tres chic (*brushes out her hair, takes out the purple scarf and winds it around her neck*). Actually we argue about colours a lot, mama—you remember how I hated black? But she’s very sure of what looks good—no, we do a lot of soul-searching together, . . . about my age, mama—(*attaches a coat pin and stands staring at the audience transformed, chic and sure of herself—modern day, cutting and incisive. She’s suddenly ready for the kill*) scared for who? Scared for me or for you, mama? Walks towards the couch and settles on it, a single spot, green lights on Shivani, who has shifted to a cigarette holder from the jacket’s pocket.

It’s your turn now, mama (*whispers, soft but steely*); remember that day Bozo died, you weren’t crying only for Bozo, were you? (*Her voice drops*) I cried late into the night and you cried, too—I learnt to cry like you mama, all quiet and swollen (*said deadpan, straight, bitter*). I cried late into the night and when I woke to get some water, I found you looking out of the window and somehow I felt it wasn’t for Bozo. I couldn’t sleep because you couldn’t sleep. (*Sighs*) I felt I’d lost both my dog and my mama, and I didn’t know what was wrong—what was the silence filling up with? (*She looks around, the light circles her dishevelled apartment—and she speaks in the darkness*). Then I heard Daddy come home and both of you arguing—it couldn’t have been about Bozo, daddy didn’t even know Bozo—then why did he throw the sheets off the bed? (*The light rests on her sheets on the floor in memory of another scene years ago*). Many years later I saw you staring like that again (*she gets up and paces*) against the window, warm breath on cold glass. And I knew that same something was wrong again (*stares like her mother*). And the silence filled up like a sponge with pain. I would try and squeeze it dry but always it filled up again. The tears forever flowed and the silences forever leaked. (*Her mother is silent, she settles back on the sofa, ramrod straight, the strains of an old song waft*

into her drawing room). The silences kept filling up. You know the day I was leaving Poona, I had packed my case—cases? (*She moves back to her bedroom*) well, two? I wanted to come here and buy everything! (*She touches her possessions.*) You were helping me carry something into the car when I looked up and saw daddy against the same window but this time Kiran Aunty was standing beside him—she was wearing a lovely rich black silk saree with a purple border—I remember because daddy was in a white kurta pyjama and she was in black. (*Shivani moves down stage and two figures move close to the kitchen window, one lady in black, one man in white, standing close together, waving into the audience as if to wave Shivani off, laughing together*). Something in the window frame made me look at you—something! And I knew, I just knew, I knew daddy was to blame for a lot of pain. I hated him, I hated you and most of all I hated myself (*she tears at her jacket, tears off her scarf and throws it into the room, lets out a cry*). I hated all of us. The silences circled us. (*The figures vanish, Shivani moves childlike to the couch, crouching in foetal position, green gels and dry ice*). The silences circled us. Like vultures, preying on dead feelings. You were surprised why I moved away so abruptly. Daddy looked bewildered, I remember. You gave me *misri*, saying it's good *shagun* to have *misri* before travelling, and do you need your prayer beads? For God's sake, I'm not a baby any more, I said, looking directly at daddy—I've got all I need, you keep the prayer beads, you need them more than I do. You looked hurt, mama, I'm sorry (*whispers*). Daddy looked hurt. I couldn't say bye to him, perhaps I looked hateful—but I couldn't help it! Most of all I hated you, why didn't you get up and fight back? Spill the red of anger—why do you absorb everything? You looked so washed out and colourless . . . (*she cries like a baby, sobs*) I just sat all curled up with anger and hate and the vultures circled overhead smelling fresh death (*she retreats into herself*). Now you know why I hate black, mama, I hate it! I hate it! (*She beats the black jacket on the ground as if it's a devil and collapses, sobbing, into it*).

Fade out. Strains of music.

When the lights come on in a spot, she is all dressed in front of the empty coat stand, in a black trouser suit with a purple scarf and a long black bag, facing the mirror; and this time her mobile goes as she puts on the last touch of mascara. She answers it confidently. It's Sanjiv checking up on her.

SHIVANI: I'm ready, absolutely.

She walks off confidently, knowingly, into a dead end relationship, off the stage into the audience, out the main door, the light fades on the dishevelled apartment, the trashcan and the alarm clock.

Extracted from Bubbles Sabharwal's one-act play Women in Black, scheduled to be published by Seagull Books, Calcutta. The playwright has been involved with theatre for years, particularly the children's theatre group Kidsworld, with Lushin Dubey.

From *Shards*

Gautam Raja

Ten Ton Tongue

Woman seated alone somewhere

I have no passion for him, so it must be love. We've gone out several times. For dinner. Dinner is so romantic. Even if you're standing at a chaat gaadi it's romantic. That's irritating sometimes. Dinner is like saying yes to all the questions you'd rather not answer. Questions you don't even want to think about. But I like going out for dinner—lunch always feels so hurried—unless it's a Sunday lunch. But then Sunday lunches are almost as bad as dinner. He looks at me a lot, when we talk—even when we don't talk. Not normal looks—special ones—sort of moony, doggy looks.

Pause

They irritate the hell out of me sometimes. There are nights when I feel like puking my quiet, candle-lit dinner all over those big eyes, that half smile that he thinks is so sexy and most of all those nervous hands. But the next day I miss them—I miss them all—even those salt cellar acrobatics he does, right from when he sits down to when the food arrives. Sometimes he does it with the pepper, and he gets little lines of it all over the table cloth and I sneeze all bloody evening.

Pause

He's such a fool. As I said, I have no passion for him—do you think I love him? It's a strange, almost staid sort of emotion, I'm content to just klunk along the way we're doing—but he, he wants something, I can tell.

Pause

Every time he drops me home after dinner he kisses me. He parks a little way from the house and then leans over and kisses me. It was a light peck on the cheek the first couple of times and then he did more . . . and more . . . and more. Now he tries to do strange things with his tongue. I don't understand why—it's so repulsive just after a meal. I used to really look forward to those sweet little pecks on the cheek, they were so tender, and then, after things changed, I would sit in the car dreading the moment we would arrive at the top of my lane. Sometimes I'd worry about it right through dinner. I'd not eat any onions and carefully pick out all the garlic. Why should I have to do something like that? It was so unfair that my entire evening had to be spoiled because of that one little incident. The only way I could enjoy it again was to tell him to stop. It seemed easy enough to say when I was rehearsing in bed, but when actually faced with him all the words got jumbled up and I was terrified that I would begin and then not know where to take it. I postponed it right through dinner, after the soup—no not now, after the lasagna—no it's not right just yet, after the apple pie. Finally, I decided to tell him in the car on the way home. But I just sat there, looking out of the window, willing myself to bring it up while I answered all his questions in monosyllables. We kept getting closer and closer to the top of my lane, and the tension kept

mounting. I felt like screaming at one point. Then we reached, and finally I turned to him and began to speak.

He just leaned over and pressed his mouth to mine. He knew I had started to say something—he chose to ignore it. He decided that he could win me over with that kiss—with his osculatory prowess—but he didn't, he just made me very angry—because he denied me my carefully planned words. I didn't care about all the ones that were to come later, but lord, I cared for the ones he killed. The ones he killed right there on my lips. So I stuck my tongue between his teeth, I heard him gasp, he loved it. But I didn't stop there. I kept pushing my tongue in further and further, until he started choking on it. He tried to shout out, but I killed his words, not on his lips, but deep in his throat, just as they were born—they died. I killed them at the fount, in their womb.

Agitated

My tongue got heavier and heavier. I could feel it. It became like a stone, just sitting there in his throat, choking him. It's like a boulder now, and I can feel it teetering, and suddenly it plunges, tearing through his vocal chords, dropping down his throat. It isn't stopping, I can't control it, it's ripping through his body, I can feel it crunching past bone and plunging deep into the car seat, ripping through all those springs and foam. It just sits there for a while, and then gets lighter. I can feel it getting lighter and lighter, and it just comes back to me, and before I know it, it's there, in my mouth, just as if nothing had happened. I could only sit there and look at the bloodied mess next to me.

He was nice, I knew he was nice, and he didn't mean any harm, and I should be very sorry for him—but all I could think were flippant thoughts, really frivolous things like—I needn't have bothered picking out all the onion and garlic from my lasagna. I could have just eaten my dinner in peace.

Blackout

Extracted from Shards by Gautam Raja, a playwright, copywriter and journalist from Bangalore

Martial Dances of Bengal

Sunil Saha



The art of dancing is actually a transformation of the untutored rhythmic body movements of primitive man down the ages. Folk dances, in particular, illustrate the close relationship between man and nature in all cultures. Magic beliefs, fertility cult, faith in a cosmic superpower all find expression in folk dances all over the world. The folk dances of India can be broadly classified into three groups: community folk dances held on major religious and social occasions; dances performed by a group of hereditary professionals mainly during a birth, bethrotal or a wedding in the village; and tribal dances rooted in aboriginal cults. The dances of the common people were performed in an open arena and developed according to their own tastes, without any concern for the classical doctrines of the performing arts.

Folk dances of Bengal display some prominent characteristics, a few of which are discussed below.

The Mask

In India, particularly in Bengal, masks are used extensively in various forms of traditional folk dramas. In many cases the dances related to dramatic episodes or historical characters are performed with masks to personify invisible spirits or supernatural forces, mythical personalities and even ordinary human beings.

The Chhau dances of Purulia district and Jhargram sub-division of Medinipur district are performed with fantastic masks. Chhau dances primarily, being related to 'Gajan Utsab' of Bengal observed in the months of Chaitra and Baisakh, were without any mask whatsoever. The form was then known as 'Kap-Jhamp'. 'Kap (Bengali)' means to pretend, acting and 'Jhamp (Bengali)'—Jhampa (Sanskrit) means to jump.

These were full of acrobatics. Moving on a single string or rope tied to two bamboo poles, hanging from a tall perpendicular log called 'Charakgach' hooked at the waistline by nails and rope, the process popularly called 'Banphnor', doing somersaults at random, movements imitating bears, monkeys, tigers, lions and other animals to the rhythms of Dhol, Dhamsa, Kansi and Shana (a smaller form of Shahnai) etc. were some of the common features of these forms, now almost obsolete.

The dancers in 'Kap-Jhamp' used paper, glue, rags and lime, chalk, ashes, brick dust and colours made from indigenous herbs for their make-up. The legendary Chhau dancer, late Jeepa Shingh Mura of Chorida and his son Padamshree Gambhir Shingh Mura, now residing in Bagmundi, were originally involved in these forms of Chhau without the mask. In an interview recorded for the archives of the National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay, organized as a joint project with Sur Bahar, a Calcutta based centre for cultural studies, Gambhir Shingh stated that he was inspired by the magnificent movements of the tigers and cattle in the jungles during his childhood when he was a village cow herd, locally called Bagal. The technique and movements thus acquired by his imitative skills have been applied in his Chhau dancing as gigantic jumps, vaults and other heroic gestures, now, of course, with masks and decorative costumes. With the emergence of the feudal powers in these areas in the early nineteenth century, the primitive styles of Chhau dances underwent drastic changes in their content and form. The village lords encouraged episodic elements from the epics and more decorations and grandeur in Chhau. Instead of mimicry, the artistes leaned gradually towards colourful masks and decorative costumes even for animal characters. The melodious Jhumurs were composed to narrate the episodes and also to support the dances with loud beats of Dhamsa, Jhanjh, Shahnai. The 'chails' (steps and movements and use of weapons) not only made the art form more attractive but gave it the vigour and strength considered essential for martial arts.

The masks of Purulia are made of paper-pulp, pieces of cloth, glue, paints etc. and Jari or Rolex fibres for aesthetic attraction, whereas the masks in Chilkiagarh of Jhargram sub-division are made of light wood. But both are quite convenient for the dancers who can move and perform for hours together. In some areas of Jhargram belt, like Chandri, Chhau dances are well supplemented by some items of Paikan dance, possibly to generate more vigour. In Gopiballavpur area, they avoid masks and instead draw colourful lines on their faces, an influence of the Mayurbhanj Chhau pattern.

The Kap-Jhamp form of group dances dominated the Chhau. But with the acceptance of epic stories, solo and duet dancing are also getting prominence. We find characters like Parasuram dancing throughout the acting area with his axe, Goshinga with his two horns pushing down enemies with vigorous gestures, Shiva coming up with his trident and establishing his vitality with vaults and turns with his decorated mask and weapon. We find Kartikeya and Ganesh with weapons like bows, arrows, clubs (gada), wheels (chakra), etc. fighting with asuras equally equipped with daggers and shields. The dancer in the role of Durga, believed to be the source of the divine spirit called Matrika Shakti, with ten weapons in her ten hands, joins the fray. The roaring lion appears and

pounces upon the demon. Together they artistically recreate a scene of real battle before the audience. The death of Abhimanyu is another popular episode in Chhau, with heroic fights between the characters.

Among other popular mask dances is Gambhira Mukha (Mask) Nach in Malda, the domain of the traditional Gambhira art. The Gambhira Mukha Nach has developed in an entirely different style, very representative of Bengali culture. Unlike Purulia Chhau, the masks of Gambhira are usually made of sacred wood by the carpenters and are heavy for the dancers to wear during the course of prolonged performances, for which physical fitness is absolutely necessary. These masks cover the entire face, including the eyes. Hence dancers can follow only the stirring notes of the Dhak (drum) during their performances. According to the traditional rites of the Gambhira Festival, which is also a form of Gajan, the third night is marked for Bara Tamasa, or 'big show' where Mukha Nach was a must even half a century ago. The show would start with the performance of the dancer wearing the mask of Hanuman, with a long tail made out of dried banana stem or fibre.

Among the major events of these dance forms, Kalinach is especially noteworthy. The martial role of this Puranic deity is well known. The costume is sometimes a skirt and sometimes black trousers. Two additional hands made of painted cardboard are positioned above the shoulder and tied to the torso. The performer takes a sword and shield in his hands to fight the enemy, the evil spirit. A few more improvised hands are hung around the waist, whilst around the neck hangs a garland of human skulls made of clay or cloth. An elongated tongue made of cardboard or thin metal, is also fitted into the mouth and pressed in place by the teeth. The facial area (when a mask is not used) and other visible parts of the body are painted black. The dance starts with lion steps and tiger steps to the beat of the Dhak in slow tempo, which quickens gradually.

In the Shumbha-Nishumbha Badh dance there are five characters enacting a dreadful battle scene with group dancers, each carrying lethal weapons. Though not sophisticatedly choreographed, this dance form has some set movements for different characters. The Mahish-Rakhal item is a duet with one dancer donning the mask of a buffalo, the horns of which are made of tin. The hostilities faced by the Rakhal, the cow herd, are artistically portrayed. The item is an example of a non-religious social event representing a secular incident, which is very rare in Gambhira Mukha Nach.

The Tibetans in the hills of Bengal perform Yaksha Chham (Dance), Singhi (Lion) Chham etc. with fantastic masks and aprons which are equally martial in nature but linked to religious ritual.

The Gamira dance, which is very popular in North Bengal districts, specially in North Dinajpur, is performed with masks. The chief practitioners of this form are the Rajbanshis. Scholars are of the opinion that Gamira, a prakrit word, stems from Goraksha Nath, whom the Rajbanshis worship. In Gamira songs we find some social awareness, prayers for protection of crops and animals etc. Gambhira, on the other hand, seems to have originated from Gambhir (Sanskrit) Nath etc. and is related to Shiva or other religious rites. There are differences between Gambhira and Gamira with respect to form and content.

Ravantaka is another little-known folk dance associated with the Dussehra festival. This is practised in Kharagpur, Medinipur district, and in the Raghu Nath Mandir near Bishnupur, Bankura district. The killing of Ravana, a huge clay model, is the main theme here. As Professor Kanti Hazra, a folk art scholar of this temple town, narrated, on Dwadashi day—two days after Vijaya Dashami—the huge structure of Ravana is placed on a cart that moves in a procession of thousands. Sometimes the model is about 20 feet high.

Another very popular folk dance with masks, called Horse Dance, is performed throughout the country. The dancer dons the skeleton of a horse made of cane and bamboo sticks and covered with decorative cloth or paper for skin. The mask of a horse

from waist to neck is fitted to the frame. The dancer himself plays the role of the horse rider and also controls its movements with rhythmic steps, concealing his feet under the skirt of the horse, holding the bridle in his left hand and a sword in his right. In the dances the rider is the conqueror. In Purulia, two horse riders fight with each other to win their sweethearts, who are also males dressed as brides and who also take part in the dancing. In Malda, on some occasions two dancers enter in the frame of a single horse; one acts as the sahis (controller) and the other plays the role of the rider. Here the feet are kept visible and move in rhythmic horse steps with heroic jumps by way of punctuation.

Raibenshe

As Gurusaday Dutt commented, among the various martial dances of Bengal the Raibenshe folk dances are remarkable for their expression of military energy and discipline and the atmosphere of martial excitement they create. The vigorous and manly movements of the body, together with the stirring notes of the drum, incite courage and daring. They afford a significant reminder that Bengalis, now believed to be a non-martial race, were once renowned for their military prowess. The robust and exciting Raibenshe dance form of Birbhum, Bardhaman and Murshidabad, replete with acrobatic feats, is practised by the indigenous farmers, and would appear to be the last surviving vestiges of these war like traditions. The spearmen or Raibenshe soldiers in medieval Bengal were in all likelihood drawn from all classes of people, including such comparatively high castes as Sadgops, a warlike and one-time ruling caste in the Gopabhum area of Western Bengal. Men of the higher castes who joined Raibenshe troops appear to have discontinued their martial practices from the time they ceased to be recruited as soldiers. But the men of the poorer castes who belonged to the Raibenshe army appear to have kept up the practice of their ancient martial dances and acrobatics as a means of livelihood, by forming escort parties for wedding processions and by displays of dancing and acrobatics.

Raibenshe dancers of Tantipara and Gohaliara in the District of Birbhum, who are also known as Ghatwals or 'defenders of gates or river crossings', are undoubtedly descended from the soldiers of the Mohammadan Rajas of Rajnagar, who carried on warfare against the East India Company long after the battle of Plassey.

The word Raibenshe is derived from rai or ray (royal, king, kingly), and bansh (Bengali)—bansha (Sanskrit)—(bamboo): which literally means 'royal bamboo'. The middle Bengal form is Ray-banshiya, from which is derived the modern Bengali. The soldiers of the infantry used lances, of which the shafts were made of solid bamboo (not hollow), to which a pointed steel head was attached, so the epithet 'raibansh' came to signify a big bamboo (vide Bengali Dictionary, *Chalantika*) and those who wielded the raibansh were called Raibenshe.

The dress is of simplest character and consists merely of the ordinary Bengali dhoti worn at the waist, the lower portion being kilted fairly high above the knees and worn in the tightened-up mal-koncha fashion. Often a long strip of red cloth is tied round the waist above the dhoti worn in the above fashion and taken between the legs and tucked up at the back. Other parts of the body are left bare. In recent times some of the Raibenshe dancers of Murshidabad have been seen wearing coloured vests, panties, even socks and kneecaps.

In the early stages, Ran Singas or Ram Singas made of cattle horn were played as trumpets. These have been replaced by the shahnai. Being a war dance, the performances are not supported by song.

Various movements of Raibenshe are full of plasticity, making them visually exciting and breathtaking. For example, bangbasha (movements imitating frogs), kumirchala (a press-up exercise), palot (revolving the body through 45° angle), Talgachh (in the form of sheershasan, a yogic exercise), cartwheel (movements by three human figures), passing through iron rings of 12 inches diameter or even less than that by more than two human

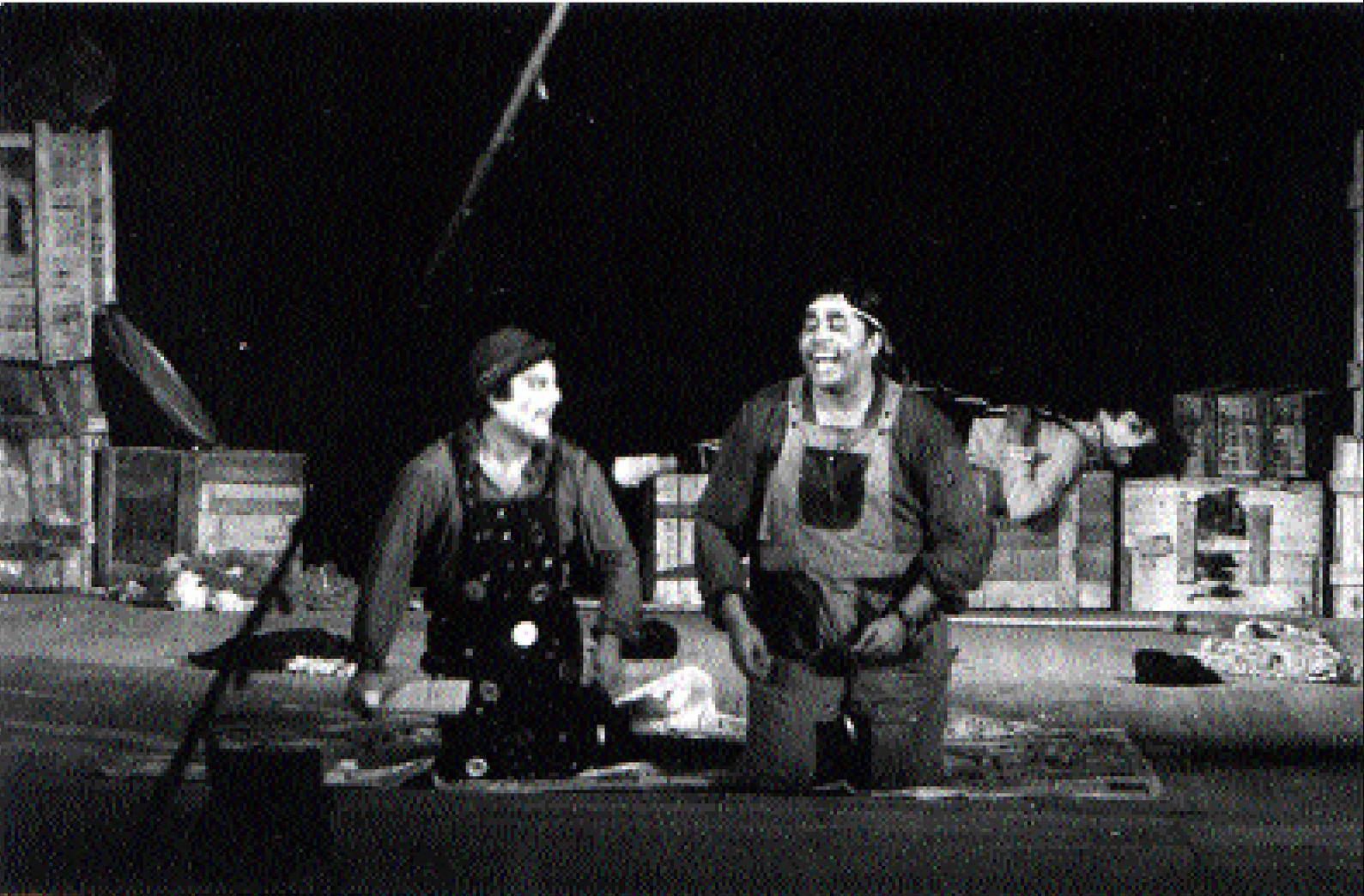
figures simultaneously, Ojandari (formation of a weighing scale and pyramid by human columns). The last item has similarities with the Panthi dance by the Bazaras of Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, which has been utilized by actor-director Habib Tanvir in his renowned stage production *Charandas Chor*. Besides, the participants yell out exclamations like 'yee-aha', 'wa-wa-wa', etc. to warm up, and also signify the change-overs. In the dancing parts, the usual features are rhythmic movements like bows and arrows, spears, lances, horse riding (without masks) in geometrical straight lines and also in circles, but never based on any episode, mythological or social. As a very common characteristic of Bengal's folk dances, the traditional male performers lay more emphasis on the development of the upper part of the body, specially the chest and arms, breath control and flexibility of muscles.

Continuing with this art form is a struggle, as it is mainly the members of various scheduled caste communities and depressed classes of Bengal like Bauri, Bagdi, Dom, Konai and Birbangshi who are the main practitioners.

Sunil Saha is a researcher and writer on the folk performing arts of West Bengal.

Theatre Experiences from Chennai

Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan



Critic and writer on theatre Vasanthi Sankaranarayanan, who contributes frequently to *STQ*, brings us up to date on two interesting theatre events held recently in Chennai.



**Performance as Metaphor: Rajat Kapoor's
*C for Clowns***

C for Clowns had its Chennai premiere at the Other Festival. It was a very unusual show in many senses. There was no written script. The dialogue, except for a few lines here and there, was mostly done through gibberish; in fact, gibberish acquired a definite style and tone of its own in its usage as a theatre tool, and demanded full and complete audience participation. Without audience participation it tended to be colourless. On the spot improvisation played an important part in the execution of the performance.

The theme, if at all there is any, is six clowns tracing a day in the life of a circus/theatre performance as they move through the day's routine—from the initial fear of facing an audience and an instinctive avoidance of being in the limelight of the stage, throwing bits and pieces from behind a covered box, the beginning snatches of a performance, introduction of a huge clown as the weightlifter and Jenny, the absentee hippo, reading a newspaper review of their performance, to suicidal attempts by a clown who has received a bad review, audition of a girl who wants to join the team, wooing of the female clown by other clowns, meals and finally the death of one of the clowns and how it affects the show.

The director, Rajat Kapoor, has been associated with theatre and film alike. Founder-member of the Delhi-based theatre group Chingari, he has directed two national award-winning documentaries, *Tharana* and *Hypothesis* and a feature film *Private Detective*. *C for Clowns* has been produced under the banner of Cinematograph and has had forty-two successful shows, thirty-two in Mumbai and the rest in other cities. The clown, according to Rajat Kapoor, has, through performances, become a metaphor for any kind of performance. The play brings to light experiences that all actors/performers have had some time in their careers—stagefright/anxiety before appearing on stage (though it may

an everyday event), the humiliation that they have to go through at auditions, the disappointment and disillusionment felt when [bad] reviews are published, and finally the indignity of death itself, which has to be forgotten as the show must go on.

On being asked about a choice of a theme such as this, he said, whether he did film or theatre, clowns for him had become a recurrent theme in all his works for the last seven/ten years. In this play he sought the culmination of the clown theme. He had also seen the film *Thampu* (Circus Tent) by the late Aravindan, which vividly portrays a clown's predicament. In his short story, *Valarthumrigangal* (Pets), M. T. Vasudevan Nair also deals with the plight of all who work in a circus—the animals, the tight-rope walkers, the trapeze artists. It becomes clear that in all these artistic productions the haunting theme is the plight of the clown, whose function it is to make the audience laugh, whatever his private sorrows or life experiences. He does not laugh. But all his gestures, facial expressions and body movements are geared towards making the audience laugh. Nobody has asked the clown whether he wants to go through this routine of exaggerated movement or slapstick comedy. They have taken it for granted that the natural temperament of the clown is one of humour and comedy. The 'humour' created by him under stagelight is totally alien to what he feels in his heart. Rajat Kapoor dwells on the plight of the clown with some insight, cloaking the narrative under a veil of humour, and this indispensable component in a circus show, who has to make other people laugh with a repetitive, humdrum humour even while he is in despair, comes alive in the performance directed by Rajat Kapoor.

Cardboard cartons strewn all around, ropes running crisscross across the stage, coloured lights and the familiar circus music over the sound system recreated the atmosphere of the circus. The costumes were in patchwork and the masks were of white paint with a red blob on the nose. What fascinated me was the way in which six actors could bring to life the charming world of the circus—complete with performing animals (also played by the actors themselves), and all the other people who make a circus what it is. The stage itself grew beyond the stage: capturing the circus arena and larger than life issues and concepts. One is left with the feeling that the circus is a microcosm of life itself.

The political implications of the production were not overt; yet newspaper clippings: 'Election Time–Selection Time–Collection Time', 'You said it Lakshman', 'Just Do it–Nike', 'Just Did it–Bill Clinton' and 'Niagra–Viagra' were satirical remarks on the political climate. The remarks given in the review such as 'Spectacular show clown', 'Thanka, Thankie, Thanko', 'Set is complicated', 'Lights are dim', 'Costumes colourful', are indicative of inane reviews that abound on the culture–entertainment circuit.

The production itself took on a very uncharted and therefore complex line of action. Starting without a script, there was an initial element of uncertainty: 'It was a great risk . . . I couldn't have done it without the committed people in my team. I didn't feel alone at any stage,' admitted Rajat Kapoor. Rehearsals initially consisted of improvisations, working with cardboard boxes, an hour a day, all of which was physically exhausting. He himself did not join in acting during rehearsals as it was difficult to act and direct simultaneously. After the play reached a certain stage he joined in the acting.

The intrinsic effect of love in life is one of the themes highlighted in the production. The clowns were leading a mechanized, robotic life before the girl comes on to the scene. They would perform their daily chores and do the stage acting in a mechanical way. But the girl changes their lives, their feelings towards her brings with it a new perspective to their outlook on life, as their sensitivity and awareness to their inner emotions is aroused. As a result, when Popo the clown really dies (as opposed to his pretending to die earlier in the play) their approach to death also changes. They do not go on with the show in a casual manner. During the show, tears flow unabashed and they stop their individual shows in between. So love gives them courage to break off from their routine

and mechanical movements and attitude to life. It is almost an act of rebellion on their part to give precedence to their tears and move away from acting.

Rajat Kapoor's *C for Clown*, in the final analysis, is a new theatre venture with the circus and clowns as reference points. The predicament of confinement—being caged externally and being caged in one's own being—becomes a metaphor for all beings devoid of the fervour of freedom, and the circus tent comes to stand for life fettered, a microcosm of life in general, where human feelings, emotions and predicaments are revealed.

Photographs of *C for Clowns* courtesy Vasanthi
Sankaranarayanan



The Madras Players: Celebrating Four Decades of Performance

The English language theatre in Chennai has been in existence for a long time. Though at present there is more than one English language theatre groups—Masquerade, Boardwalkers—the oldest and most prominent group is Madras Players. Madras Players has been performing for more than 44 years. They claim that not only is it one of the oldest functioning theatre groups in the country, but is also probably the group which has staged the maximum number of Indian plays in English. While the group has done several works of British, American and European playwrights, they began to attract a larger audience after they started doing plays by Indian playwrights.

Started in 1956 with a fund from the British Council, it has managed till four years back to put up plays with sponsorships and nominal ticket collections. Among the founder-members are late V. S. Gopalakrishnan, late Thambi Kadambavanam, N. S. Yamuna, Grace Krishnaswami, Sama Swaminathan. The Madras Players Theatre Club was started four years ago in 1996 with the intention of bringing in some permanent funds through membership subscriptions for continuation of theatre activities throughout the year. The annual subscription is a nominal amount of Rs. 300 and they have managed to enlist more than 300 members in this group. From the proceeds of the annual subscriptions, Madras Players, the core group has been able to do several smaller productions (with costs not exceeding Rs. 50,000) such as poetry readings, readings of English translations of books in the regional languages and theatre workshops. Through this venture, the Madras Players has been able to keep their activities going, giving a fresh lease of life to the original group. The core group consists of veterans such as P. C. Ramakrishna, Vishalam Ekambaram, Bhagirathi Narayanan, N. S. Yamuna, Mithran Devanesan, Gopi Nayar and Ravi Bhaskaran.

Madras Players is a very informal group. They don't have formal meetings or election of committees. They have never changed their status from an amateur theatre group to a professional repertory group, even though they can claim as former members, Girish Karnad and late Vimal Bhagat. Neither the directors of plays nor actors are paid any remuneration. The technicians helping out with sets, props, lights and sound are paid only their actual costs. In the present situation, when no one works for free in any field, this is truly a unique feature. This is probably one of the reasons why Madras Players have retained their amateur theatre group status. In remaining a truly amateur theatre group, it has been able to give an impetus to the theatre movement itself. Young aspirants who want to become theatre actors always find a place in Madras Players productions. In all their productions one sees new faces. So, Madras Players effectively becomes a training ground for young people, giving encouragement to new talents. It is a matter of great pride that one of the people associated with the Madras Players in the sixties and who later became a luminary in the Indian theatre scene as playwright/ director/ actor is Girish Karnad, who is also a Gnyanpeeth awardee.



The new millennium dawned for Madras Players with new insights, new beginnings with their decision to do a mega production. They came out of their shell, shedding their informal low-profile image and decided to put up *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*, written by Girish Karnad for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), who commissioned him to write a radio play in English to commemorate 50 years of Indian Independence. The playwright had read a few passages from this play during a felicitation organized by the Chennai Branch of the British Council, when he was approached by Madras Players, requesting for his permission to produce it as a stage play. Karnad readily agreed and made modifications to do it as a stage play and its international premiere was held in Chennai at the YMCA outdoor amphitheatre from 17 to 20 February 2000.

This was a first in many respects for Madras Players—they were doing the first original English play by Girish Karnad (all his earlier plays were written first in Kannada and subsequently translated into English); they were doing a lavish production with a Rs. 4,00,000 budget all on their own, using the large outdoor space of the YMCA amphitheatre for the first time. They also held, for the first time, a press conference explaining their intentions and enacting a scene from the play. The competently handled publicity yielded stupendous results—*Dreams of Tipu Sultan* ran to packed houses on all four days, with 200 people watching the show each day, thus making a total of 800 people who watched the theatre performance. Besides, there were two shows for school children which was also well attended. This is a truly impressive audience response for any theatre show in Chennai.

Talking to Karnad, I asked him whether BBC had chosen the theme or the person or event on which he had to write his play. 'No,' he said with a laugh, 'they just wanted any person or theme connected with Indian Independence. As for Tipu, they had conveniently forgotten him. I chose Tipu as the subject of the play partly because I am from Karnataka, of which he was the ruler; but mainly because, in my opinion, there has not been a hero like him in Karnataka, during the last 400 years. I have offended many people in Karnataka by saying this.' He went on to explain why his play is titled *Dreams of Tipu Sultan*: 'Do you know there is an actual diary in which Tipu had written and recorded in his own handwriting, his dreams? It was in Persian, but was translated into English. A. K. Ramanujam told me about the existence of this book. I am a great admirer of Tipu and I have a shelf full of books on him. So I photocopied this book and that became the source material and inspiration for my play.' Karnad emphasized that his intention was to show Tipu not merely as a warrior chieftain of the eighteenth century, but to bring out his qualities as a visionary, a family man, a patriot who opposed British colonial rule and sought unity among the Indian princes to overthrow British rule; above all as a man who had a modern mind and dynamic ideas.

The script is written in deceptively simple and direct English, yet the dialogues are crisp and the structure of the play is tight. Without any melodrama using flowery language, Karnad has managed to pack a great deal of emotional depth into his script. Even when you read the script (as opposed to watching the play unfolding itself), it arouses great emotions in you; the tragedy of Tipu Sultan is revealed in dramatic terms with an economy of words.

Initially the pace is slow as it is a narration of what happened by the Indian historian Kirmani and the British historian, Colonel Mackenzie, but the pace quickens and the momentum is gradually built up. The climax is reached in the ninth and tenth scenes, when Tipu has to surrender to Cornwallis not only a part of his kingdom, but give up two of his young sons as hostages. The death of his favourite queen, Ruquayya Banu, adds poignancy to his tragedy. From then onwards, it is a steady downfall, culminating in his ultimate defeat at the hands of the British and death in the battlefield. This is a play where utmost importance is given to words spoken by the actors. The action had to be built up by the hints given in the script by the director. I go to the extent of saying that

even if the performance of this play was denuded of all the externals such as the action, stage sets/ props, the lights, the sound through music and the costumes, the play would still hold the attention of an audience, if the words were rendered properly, paying attention to the pronunciation, enunciation, modulation of voice and the tonal quality of saying it.

N .S. Yamuna, a founder-member and a veteran of Madras Players directed this play. Yamuna's forte is mounting a play with a large caste with due attention to the finer details through carefully choreographed movements and unrelenting insistence on perfection in dialogue delivery and emotional expressions. Discussions with her revealed that she had prepared herself for directing this play by reading all the material available on the subject and having elaborate discussions with the playwright himself. In her director's note she says, 'Tipu in his time was the most contemporary of minds and his hatred of the British was his lifelong obsession. Why was this so, when he identified with so many of their characteristics and agonized over the lack of these in his own countrymen? That was his dilemma. He stood for change and innovation and intuitively recognized the sweeping changes that imminently identified with the British governance in India. And yet, his entire life was spent in passionately expounding the focus of his consciousness—the expulsion of the British from his motherland.' This awareness of the dichotomy in Tipu's character made Yamuna sensitive to the presentation of the play.

'The drama in the dialogue is the enactment of history. Our production recognizes this,' she pointed out. 'The focus is on the actors, with just the right touches from costumes, sets, lights and soundtrack. The location does the rest.' The play therefore became an example of the theatre (stage) being given back to the actor and all other elements such as music, stage sets, lights, costumes taking on a secondary role, complementing and enhancing the show. At no time were these externals allowed to overwhelm the actors.

The only change she made in the script was leaving out a few statements given by Karnad as epilogue. Like a true theatre person, she realized that while these would work in film commentaries, in theatre, they would only decrease the dramatic tension and weaken the climax of the play. She stopped with the simple line of Kirmani, the historian: 'That afternoon, Tipu Sultan was killed in the battle.' This gave the play a circular pattern. It all began with Kirmani and Mackenzie relating the last battle Tipu fought with Wellesley and the search for his corpse by the British. When it ended with a statement on his death, the events had come a full circle. What more is there to be said after Tipu Sultan who had so many dreams for his state, Mysore and India died? With him died the dream of India gaining independence from colonial rule. With him also ended the chance of India becoming a modern, young nation blooming with ideas and thoughts of a contemporary nature. The most interesting fact is that even now India suffers from the same problems as she did during Tipu's time—the fragmentation, the lack of unity and common purpose, the unwillingness to take on modern ideas of infrastructure and governance. The timeliness of the play becomes apparent when we reflect on these issues. It becomes a telling comment not only on the past, but the present as well.

Some of the theatrical decisions she took hinge on the basic position she adopted. She chose the YMCA outdoor amphitheatre for the performance—the old oak trees providing a leafy canopy over the theatre space, the semicircular stage and the different levels on the stage with steps leading to these levels allowing the director to get out of the proscenium and enhance the historical character and ambience of the play. Through shifts in space, time shifts were made. At the same time, she had the wisdom to know that the big stage would dwarf the actors. So she chose to confine the main action on the stage at the lower level over the pit (artificial pond). A black backdrop was used to cut off the big stage.

In certain scenes it was lifted and action was transferred to that spot. She told me that





the big stage was used as the 'British space' while the small stage was used for unfolding the drama of Tipu. The creation of a smaller stage was for having an intimate theatre; for in this play, Karnad was concentrating on the man and not the grandeur of his court or times. His inner self, his life with his family and even his own personal dreams had to be done on a personal level even when the performance was public. It was as though the big stage was the outer shell of the theatre and the small stage was the inner self to be used for revealing intimate and hitherto unknown facets of the protagonist. Spaces at different levels were used to allow the dream/spectacle to emerge. Around the amphitheatre tinsheets were used to cut off the noises from outside and to give the theatre the shape and character of a bowl. The only external noises that were heard during the play were the hooting of the owl, the muezzin's call and the flapping wings of bats, which lent an eerie sense of impending tragedy to the whole play.

Realizing that the word (dialogue) was the most important element in the play, utmost importance was given to the rendition of the dialogue. Everyone, including the three small children who acted as Tipu's sons, was audible even in the back rows and their dialogue delivery had only few flaws. This from a truly amateur group, with many of them stepping on to the stage for the first time was a remarkable achievement. The melodrama was given due importance and the actors emoted so well that even the hard hearted had lumps in their throats during certain scenes. In order to give variety to the action in the play the entire second act (where the soldiers are seen searching for Tipu's dead body) was done through mime and voice over. Another scene, the deliberations of the British, after Richard Wellesley arrived in India as the Governor General was done as a shadow play. Yamuna had another reason for doing it this way. She had only two British actors to do the role of about six British characters in the play. So some of the roles had to be taken up by Indians. So, she decided to reveal the Indians as the British only through shadows. Impersonation has its own limitations when one has to deal with the colour of the skin and features. The actor was represented by a shadow with the pre-recorded voice being played in perfect synchronization with the movements. In any case, the British were not the focus of the play. So, even if they were reduced to shadows with voices, what was wrong with it? I would say it is a case of poetic justice.

Another technique she used was transformation. Transformation is an old Indian theatre technique which is used in the ritualistic dances such as Teyyam from Kerala. In the transformation technique, the actor becomes the character for the duration of the play. The identification is so complete that he/she walks, talks and feels like the character. Yamuna encouraged the actors to transform themselves into the characters they enacted through the appearance, stances, mannerisms, voice changes etc. The best examples of transformation seen in the play are: Kirmani (the 21 year old Harsha becoming the 81 year old Kirmani), Tipu (young Aseem becoming the mercurial, dynamic Tipu), Nana Phadnavis (a Supreme Court lawyer, Aryama Sundaram, becoming the proud, pleasure loving, shrewd Nana), Nadeem Khan (Banker Vikram turning into a commander of soldiers, noted for his brawn more than brain), Mir Sadiq (journalist Gautam becoming the cunning, scheming, evil Mir Sadiq), Kamaruddin (an unimpressive Jagan turning into the imposing army commander), Ruquayya (a businesswoman, Sriya, becoming a proud queen), Poorniah (the corporate executive Srinath turning into the typical Brahmin adviser), the three children turning into three princes. Not only in training, but in casting also Yamuna showed her intuitions.

The most important directorial input was in the choreography of movements. Not once did any actor mask another actor or take unnecessary steps. They did not shuffle around while standing in one place or move their hands without a purpose. There were two instances when the choreography seemed very imaginative and significant. In the scene where Tipu is finally speaking to his four close and faithful commanders and advisers, the scene is arranged in such a way that the stage is divided into two by an invisible diagonal. Tipu remains in his section of the stage and never crosses to the other space. While Tipu moves around in a restless manner, the others remain still as statues. Visually the impression is created that Tipu is isolated and the generals are going to betray him very soon. Similarly after his defeat at the hands of Cornwallis, when he visits the Maratha Chief, Hari Pant, the tension is created by Tipu walking fast from a higher level and crossing the stage, while Hari Pant remains still in his space. Again, while they talk, Tipu is going around Hari Pant all the time, the impression created is of an angry tiger growling and closing in upon his prey.

In this play, most of the actors and actresses have only small roles, their appearance restricted to one scene or two. Yamuna was conscious of the fact that within that short time they would have to create such an impact that these characters would be indelibly etched in the minds of the viewers. She herself told me that at times she had to work

backwards to achieve this effect. Tipu says of Ruquayya Banu after her death: 'Ruquayya Banu, you were too much of a queen to see me in disgrace.' Yamuna had only one scene to show Ruquayya as the queenly queen; she managed to do it to the head of the actress that she did it to perfection. The relationship between Tipu and Ruquayya was also highlighted in the leave-taking scene. It was one of the most tender moments in the play, enhanced by superb acting.

Coming to the actors, it was a young group of 35 people, most of whom were going on stage for the first time. What made a difference or was apparent was their commitment to the theme, acting and their whole hearted involvement in the whole process. Their willingness to be trained, corrected and moulded helped this process. Their awareness of history and Tipu's role in it was very gratifying. While they paid a great deal of attention to their individual roles, they were sensitive to the needs of the other actors and were helpful to them. In short, they worked as a team and pulled together in one direction and their unity helped the director to bring unity, cohesion and smooth flow into the play itself. Identification with the tragedy of Tipu and his short but great role in the pre-independent India also helped them to understand their individual roles well. All of them did their roles well; there were a few shortfalls, and inadequacies here and there; but by and large all of them did what was expected of them. It is not fair to expect more from an amateur group who had three months to put this play together. The actors who really stood out are Aseem Sharma (Tipu), Aryama Sundaram (Nana Phadnavis), T. T. Srinath (Poorniah), Vikram Gopalakrishnan (Nadeem Khan), Sriya Chari (Ruquayya Banu), Paul Mathew (Gulam Ali), Jagan (Kamruddin), the three children, Madhulica, Siddharth and Sukrit Chowdhary as the three princes. Tipu's identification to the character he was enacting was total and that helped because he is the central character around whom the whole play is woven.

Coming to the sets and lights, Natesh is not a new person to the Chennai theatre scene. Even then, the sets he produced for this play were extraordinary in their minimalism and imaginative recapturing of the times. With a few chairs, stools and tables in white cotton wood, and red velvet upholstery, he was able to capture the regal ambience of Tipu's times. The tent for the Maratha chief, Hari Pant was created out of five or six thick ropes hanging from the walls. The significance of minimalization in sets becomes meaningful, when one looks into history and realizes that Tipu shunned ornamentation of any kind in buildings, dresses etc. He was more in favour of elegance and sophistication and practicality. Suggestions were predominant in Natesh's creations. For example, the chairs made for Kirmani and Mackenzie had curved trellis work at the back, reminders of a tiger's stripes, maybe a salutation to Tipu as the Tiger of Mysore. The semicircular stage covering the pit where the main action took place was simple, but ingenious. Natesh used strong cottonwood to make this stage, so even elephants could have walked on it without breaking it. Lighting was good, giving a dreamy, nostalgic ambience in general, but focusing enough on the actors to show their expressions and movements.

Music played an important part in this play; it provided the interlude between the scenes, giving time for change of props; it also provided the mood and prelude to the scenes enacted. Music was specially composed by Mohan Narayanan with assistance from Anil. Discussions with Narayanan revealed to me that his main aim was to provide the right ambience through music. He took into consideration such elements as Tipu's patriotism, the wars he had to fight against the British, the tragedy of losing his wife and children, the treachery of his followers and the non-cooperation of his fellow chieftains. He used six to eight Indian classical ragas such as Desh, Subhapanthavali, Dharmavathi, Gowrimanohari, Prabhat etc. to suggest the various moods. He then decided to use piano and drums as the background music instruments. The major reference for the use of piano was the existence of a famous composer, [Francois] Couperin, in the court of the



French king, Louis XVI. The French connection that Tipu had, Mohan thought, could be brought out in the music, through the use of piano and in the orchestration he wanted a real fusion where the form itself is a combination of Indian and Western music. Even in the selection of vocalists, Narayanan showed his deep understanding of the play. He chose Mussalman singers to render the songs in their own special style, not obliterating the rough edges in their voices and tones. It took two to three weeks to compose and record the music for the play.

The flowing costumes with gold thread embroidery had that ethereal quality of the



muslin about them, though the materials used were ordinary cotton fabrics like malmal and longcloth. The turbans, the white and red robes for the Marathas, and the white and pastel shades for Tipu and the courtiers were elegant, sophisticated and enhanced the visual quality of the play. Designed by Sarika Kamalhasan, the costumes had an

elegance, sophistication and an understated magnificence that is important when one is recreating a period in history.

To sum up, watching *Dreams of Tipu Sultan* was a fulfilling theatre experience: the parts and the whole merged with an unusual fluidity and ease.

Photographs of *The Dreams of Tipu Sultan*

by Mohan Das V. Badagara

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From Deconstruction to Deconstructionist: Harold Pinter

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Social Deconstruction

A party involves a gathering which facilitates social intercourse within society at large. The conglomeration, therefore, is apparently meant to ease the process of communication and interaction among individuals of differing natures and mental wavelengths, rather than accentuate the breakdown of communication among them. In the plays by Pinter which culminate in a party, one is faced with a different proposition altogether: namely, the evasion of communication. The continuous cross-talk that people indulge in, is a way of avoiding exposure of their vulnerable selves to other individuals, with each vying for a position of power and dominance over the other. In other words, language becomes the most sophisticated means of non-communication. Thus, the presence of the innocent black marks on a page, which are endowed with traces or vestiges of meaning to provide an insight to the main text of the plays, involves a mimetic representation. But this representation is necessarily to be defined in terms of absence or fissures in the text, which include connotation and symbolism.

The Birthday Party, Pinter's first three-act play, is one of his very best studies in the art of chat. True to its title, *The Birthday Party* contains a birthday party—for Stanley, who insists it is not his birthday. Birthday not only means the anniversary of one's birth, it also means the day of one's birth, and in the play, the celebration of the former helps create the latter. The intruders turn Stanley into a 'new' man. He is reborn at their hands, made into a different kind of a person on a birthday that eventually becomes a birth-day. In its bare outlines, the story tells of Stanley, a nincompoop whose claims include [among other things] of having once been a concert pianist. The only lodger in a seaside guest house, he leads a vegetative life with his easygoing landlord Petey and over-protective landlady Meg. There is the unexpected arrival of two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, followed by a pseudo birthday party arranged in Stanley's honour. The two visitors could perhaps be an external manifestation of a guilt complex which Stanley may be nurturing. In any case, he is first subjected to a brutal interrogation, and then compelled to join in a game of blind man's buff which ends with his being flattened against a wall, the two figures of Goldberg and Mc Cann converging upon him menacingly in the torchlight. In the final act, Stanley seems to have been reborn, and is able to emit gurgling sounds from his throat, as though he were a new-born baby. Thus, the titular birthday party may very well be indicative of celebrating Stanley's rebirth, having emerged from the womb which sheltered him so long, to be appropriated within society. 'Clean-shaven' and 'dressed in a dark, well-cut suit and white collar', Stanley is led away by the two mysterious strangers, and Petey can offer only the most token resistance.

Stan, don't let them tell you what to do.

The play is parsimonious and ungenerous with information, but is exuberant in terms of mindless talk. In a sense Pinter is 'the maestro of the tittle-tattle of quotidian verbiage', as Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson suggest. The conversations in which the play abounds are depressingly dismal, heartrendingly trivial but paradoxically at the core of daily life in every household. He exploits clichés and worn-out expressions and depicts the vacuity in our everyday monotonous life. For instance, Goldberg's complacent and

self-satisfied articulation of rotting fragments from a language of null feeling and null sensibility reveals the impasse that has entered language:

Culture? Don't talk to me about culture. He [Uncle Barney, to whom he had been an apprentice] was an all-round man . . . He was a cosmopolitan.

School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects . . . Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing.

The play opens in the phatic mode, a customary opening gambit to establish linguistic contact. The ritualized exchange over the breakfast table involves Meg, a garrulous woman who tries to communicate with a laconic husband Petey, through an obtrusive third medium, the newspaper. The breakfast itself, comprising cornflakes, is significant, but the ritual behind it draws on a popular cliché of the nagging wife and the withdrawn, downtrodden, almost imbecilic husband. The newspaper in such a context is an effective barrier, which has an alienating effect ensuring an evasion of communication. On the other hand, the trivialities that Meg utters seem as necessary to her as the very air she breathes. She prattles on, 'incapable of keeping silent.' That is to say, she talks in order to avoid talking. Consequently, Meg's conversation is the paradigm of the existential chat, whereby she talks to make sure that she exists, and that other people around her are aware of it. She, as Guido Almansi and Simon Henderson point out, 'plays her futile word games for the serious purpose of having her own existence confirmed by the sound of a reciprocal voice, by the mere sequence of a mutual exchange.'

The information imparted by Stanley and Goldberg regarding their background and motivation proves to be partial and raises new issues. This is because the more details they employ, the less convincing they become, and this gives rise to ambiguity. There are some unremarkable switches from name to surname and back, to accentuate the shifting moods as the two intruders set to work upon their intimidation of Stanley. At one point, he is accused of using a false name: Goldberg himself turns out to have no less than three first names.

But Pinter objects to the 'because of drama' and asks,

What reason have we to suppose that life is so neat and tidy?

The interrogation of Stanley consists of rationally meaningless combinations of questions and accusations—also suggestive of the absurd. Goldberg and McCann are successful in breaking Stanley's eyeglasses, crushing his spirit and eventually driving him to a breakdown, leaving him physically and mentally shattered. Furthermore, McCann calmly tears a newspaper into five equal strips while Stanley nervously paces the room. McCann's action may be interpreted as the destruction of a medium of communication. But what is more important is that it places the visitors, McCann and Goldberg, in a relation of dominance over the subservient position of Stanley, who gradually is unnerved. In this sense, a discourse of power is constructed with a claim on actuality.

The theme of eyes devoid of eyesight is a metaphor used increasingly to represent a mental rather than a physical state. Pinter is able to reveal the essence of human desolation taking recourse to this symbol of physical distress. When Stanley first appears, unshaven and scruffy for his boarding-house breakfast, he is wearing his glasses, and for all his unwholesome appearance he is cocky and full of self-assurance. Throughout the play, significantly, his moments of vulnerability are indicated with great precision by the removal of his glasses. Inevitably, the interrogation which the intruders mount against Stanley involves the forcible removal of his glasses. In Act II, in the eerie birthday party, Stanley is persuaded to surrender his glasses in a game of blind man's buff, and McCann deliberately breaks Stanley's glasses, snapping the frames, and this ultimately reduces him to a catatonic state of speechlessness. The glasses that represent his nonconformist vision are soon to be replaced with ones to make him 'see straight'.

Everyday objects, insignificant and marginal, are attributed a symbolic weight which undermines the naturalistic surface in Pinter's plays. For example, the toy drum registers Stanley's mental distress by the increasingly uncontrolled rhythms of his playing, until he puts his foot through it, signalling his total breakdown.

Almost any passage can seem to have a slight tilt towards physical and sexual suggestiveness, or an exaggeration that only half conceals mockery or fear. The use of the word 'succulent' with respect to the fried bread shows an exploitation of differences in the awareness of the characters on stage. Stanley was stating exaggeratedly that the fried bread was not very edible, and to Meg, who is a combination of motherliness and senile eroticism, he appears to be making an improper suggestion. Therefore, the forward movement of the dialogue is seen to depend on the distance between the unexpressed awareness of the speakers. Words are seen to send minds to different destinations in place and time.

Consequently, it can be concluded that the play can be understood as a complex poetic image which exists on a multitude of levels. A complex pattern of association and allusion is assembled, to express a complex emotional state.

Tea Party culminates in a party given by Disson, a manufacturer of sanitaryware, to celebrate his first wedding anniversary. The party is organized in the office. Everyone is there: Disson's parents, old characters uttering perfunctory Pinterisms: the unholy alliance of Diana, his wife, Willy, his brother-in-law, and Wendy, his secretary; the twins, Disson's children: Disley, Disson's friend and defaulting best man. Ironically, that should have been a successful businessman's triumph, a celebration of success in public and private life, rather than a scene of his breakdown. While he sits there with eyes bandaged, listening to the rattle of teacups and the murmur of conversation, he suffers a mental picture of Willy and the two girls playing lovers' games amidst the office furniture. This is the final blow that drives Disson, his bandage finally removed, to one of those staring, speechless silences which forms the chilling but open conclusion to so many of Pinter's plays—his blindness and immobility, shocking in themselves, becoming all the more shocking in the context of a sedate tea party.

The play reflects how professional men and women under varying degrees of tension go about their everyday business. The world of the office has its own myths: the ringing telephones, the arcane jargon of the business world, the endless cups of tea, and the typist with men vying for her attention. Symbolically, it is a kind of a meta-world which mirrors the crises, conflicts and emotional upheavels of life outside in a 9 am to 5 pm pattern of rivalry, friendship and fragile decorum among the desks and filing cabinets.

This office setting provides for Pinter an open ended opportunity for a variety of dramatic images: Disson, a self-made man and also the boss, who interviews Wendy for the post of a secretary. This interview becomes an archetypal conflict between masculine power and feminine subtlety. Moreover, the arrival of Willy and Diana expresses Disson's decline and fall in territorial terms. His enthusiasm for the gleaming sanitaryware he sells is linked obliquely to the grotesque sexual fantasies which end by turning his office into a nightmare. The scene towards the beginning of the play when Disson interviews Wendy, an applicant for a job, is indicative of the office ambience gradually becoming an extension of Disson's personality and the perturbations that afflict him.

Disson: . . . We manufacture more bidets than anyone else in England. [He laughs.] Its almost by way of being a mission. . .

Well now this post is, in fact, that of my personal assistant . . . A very private secretary, in fact. And a good deal of responsibility would undoubtedly devolve upon you. Would you . . . feel yourself capable of discharging it?

Wendy: Once I'd correlated all the fundamental features of the work, sir, I think so, yes.

Disson: All the fundamental features, yes. Good.

The text, it appears, points to an occasional vacuity; the subject on the contrary is packed with interesting implications. The normal situation seems to be reversed with the interviewer exhibiting signs of unease and the interviewee appearing cool and unruffled. Wendy has to make no real attempt to establish her qualifications for the job; instead it is Disson who is driven to boasting about his prowess in his unenviable position. Besides, there is a strong sexual innuendo which underlies the entire conversation, resulting in breaking down the norms, reversing the roles and making weak the strong.

Shortly after he has offered Wendy the job he reveals 'I'm getting married tomorrow.' There is comedy in the parody of the wedding speech made by Willy, supposedly Diana's brother.

Diana—my sister—was the dear grace of our household, the flower, the blossom, and the bloom. One can only say to the groom: groom your fortune is immeasurable. I have not known Robert for a long time . . . But in that short time I have found him to be a man of integrity, honesty and humility . . . he has built his business up into one of the proudest and most vigorous in the land.

Disson, subsequently offers his new brother-in-law a post in his firm; Willy accepts with alacrity. The question which then arises is, is Willy consciously mounting an assault upon Disson's supremacy, undermining his confidence and inveigling himself into the office or has he been innocently motivated in a series of actions which are to rebound upon Disson only because of his own distorted sense of persecution? Pinter leaves it to us to interpret the little evidence as we please.

Later when Disson addresses Willy on his first day at office, the speech is tinged with irony.

Nothing is more sterile or lamentable than the man content to live within himself . . . It seems to me essential that we cultivate the ability to operate lucidly upon our problems and therefore be in a position to solve them.

The irony indicates a sort of question mark that delicately hangs in between the utterer and the utterance, the writer and the written word.

As the play gradually works towards its climax, Willy reminisces again with Disson, trying desperately to share the memories from which he is excluded. He gets the feeling that Willy is closer to his sister than the husband to his wife.

Willy: Music playing

Disson: On the piano

Willy: The summer nights. The wild swans.

The same psychological forces which bedevil Disson's relations with Willy are at work undermining his parental confidence.

Michael Anderson points out, 'Nowhere . . . is the gap between the words we use and the experiences we undergo so wide as in our sexual lives, and sex turns us all into Pinter characters, muttering trite inconsequentialities as profound, irrational mysteries engulf us.'

This points to the gap, the metaphysics of absence emphasized by deconstructionist theory which attributes a meaning to what can never be said. Therefore it is not surprising that the physical presence of Wendy, cool, proper and yet sometimes ready for more intimate approaches, unsettles and finally overpowers her newly married boss.

Much is left unexplained in the play and an attempt at rationalizing the behaviour patterns of the characters is futile. As in *The Birthday Party*, here too Pinter makes use of the metaphor of blindness when Disson is overcome by sudden moments of sightlessness—a physical disability signalling his isolation and waning prowess.

Blindness is a condition of total dependence which in this context immediately takes on sexual connotations:

Wendy: I always fell like kissing you when you've got that on round your eyes. Do you know that? Because you're all in the dark.

This may involve double entendre or it may be taken in the literal sense alone of not being able to see owing to the physical obstruction of the chiffon scarf. The question which then arises is, how much are we actually able to perceive even without a physical obstruction. Nothing is verifiable nor is meaning determinate. A moment later Wendy says:

No—you mustn't touch me, if you're not wearing your chiffon.

Thus, the contradictory aspect of a sexual relationship, attraction and repulsion, are polarized by Disson's retreat into childlike helplessness and Wendy's reactions to him in and out of that condition. Moreover, the combination of sex, blindness and power (Wendy wrapping the chiffon scarf around Disson's eyes and assuming control of him) suggests links between potency, sight and authority, and his loss of one suggests loss of the others. However, the play does not lack in humour. Its comedy of repetition even derives from sight, as is the case when Disson's mother asks, 'Have I seen that mirror before? No. It's new. I knew I hadn't seen it.' Comedy also derives from incongruity: after praising the bride's taste and sensibility, Willy applauds her ability in competitive swimming; from the unexpected—when Wendy explains that she left her previous job because her employer never stopped touching her, Disson asks 'Where?'; and from double entendre evinced after Disson's dictation of a letter to Wendy followed by sexual innuendos. Wendy reads back from the pad 'There should be no difficulty in meeting your requirements.'

Pinter, in course of preaching his gospel of indeterminacy with a blind determinist fervour, unwittingly propounds a theory in line with the post structuralist theory. This may be summed up in the exchange between John and Tom, Disson's children, which in turn sums up the play

John: Children seem to mean a great deal to their parents, I've noticed.
Though I've often wondered what *a great deal* means.

Tom: I've often wondered what *means* means.

Party Time is a powerful exploration of the malaise of society which in turn reflects the malaise of the individual psyche. The play revolves around a social gathering of people whose biographical data is unknown and unverifiable, while the dialogue they mouth is ambiguous. Each character seems to inhabit his/ her own private world. They have the capacity to create non-actual worlds based on a set of supposed desires and fantasies. Besides, each character is viewed in terms of powerful, inexplicable forces acting from within rather than in terms of social function and social relationships. The stage directions refer to a door which is never used. It is a simple, ordinary door but can become a source of nameless fear and menace. Characters may or may not make an appearance through the door. Furthermore, spasmodic party music plays throughout the play accentuating the indeterminate and unpredictable quality of the play.

The conversation indulged in by the invitees, repetitive, banal and trite, sounds thoroughly hollow. The form of dialogue, with its constant leap-frogging and casting-back in sense, its verbal misunderstandings, are all characteristics of everyday speech which Pinter irons out into a logical, grammatical lingua franca. The dialogue is filled with a studied vagueness

Terry: *It's* got everything.

Gavin: Has *it*?

Terry: Oh, yes. Real class.

I mean, what I mean to say . . . *they've* got a bar right there.

This is how the play commences. The events and the agents are not specified, but only indicated pronominally as 'that', 'it', 'her', through that form of indexical reference known as anaphora. In a sense this creates through co-reference, the appearance of continuity in the universe of discourse: it maintains the stability of the object once used and plays the role of suggesting that the spectator is 'discovering' a world—and indeed a communicative event, already in progress.

Pinter is seen to make use of the stream-of-consciousness technique whereby the conversation flits from hot towels to a barber, to blackheads and to childhood. Without their being any logical coherence or rational, ordered development of thought, there is continual cross-talk without much communication between the characters.

Besides, Pinter makes use of social clichés and conventional attitudes such as are observed when Gavin says:

So odd, the number of men who can't control their wives. It's the root of so many ills, you know. Uncontrollable wives.

These categories of social constructs reinforce Derrida's stand that speech acts derive their operative meaning from the fact that they embody conventional forms and tokens of utterance which are already in existence before any speaker comes to use them. The language employed abounds in colloquialisms, clichés and paradox

Terry: All you have to do is to shut up and enjoy the hospitality and mind your own fucking business.

Charlotte: I've been talking shit. In a manner of speaking.

Fred: Your language was always deplorable.

Terry in course of addressing the gathering later in the play says

I'm talking of a truly warm and harmonious environment. You won't find voices raised in our club. People don't do vulgar, sordid and offensive things. And if they do, we kick them in the balls and chuck them down the stairs with no trouble at all.

Irony is embedded in these lines as it is in the subsequent lines:

Our club—is a club which is activated, which is inspired by a moral sense, a set of moral values, unshakeable, rigorous, fundamental, constant.

There is an implicit power struggle operative at all levels in the play. Each invitee and the host try to dominate the discourse by virtue of the language they speak which has a very distinct flavour, for each tries to manipulate the conversation to serve his or her end.

Extracted from Ms Sengupta's unpublished M. Phil dissertation 'The Language and the Rhetoric of Communication in the Plays of Harold Pinter'.

Remembering Ranja . . . Tripura Kashyap

Tripura Kashyap is a contemporary dancer/choreographer and dance therapist. She is based in Bangalore and is the Founder–Director of Apoorva Dance-Theatre.

Ranjabati Sircar, one of India’s most dynamic contemporary dancers, committed suicide in Mumbai on 23 October 1999. This last act of hers came as a shock to people who knew her as someone with a strong personality and sharp intellect. At 36, it seemed as though she had everything going right for her, yet her last email to a friend talked about battling with the dark spaces within herself.

Apart from training in several dance forms and martial traditions in India and abroad, she performed extensively with Dancer’s Guild, Calcutta—a dance company set up by her mother, Manjushri Chaki Sircar. Ranjabati, recognized as a compelling performer and choreographer in her own right, attracted attention for her solo dance-theatre pieces, like *Cassandra*. She taught dance, won several awards for her choreography and was in the process of establishing a centre for contemporary dance in Calcutta. She also wrote extensively on contemporary dance theory and practice in India.

After hearing of Ranjabati’s suicide, I had another one of those imaginary conversations with God. I said: ‘I would give anything to know what death is.’ ‘Well that’s simple, just give up your life and you’ll find out,’ said God. I remember feeling a strange, cold wind blow over that bright, warm, sunny day.

It was on one such day in February 1999 that Ranjabati spoke of death and dancing while walking by the sea at Fort Cochin. The evening before, she had performed a dance symbolizing death—a voyeuristic, improvised journey. When asked why a theme as morbid as death, she said she was extremely curious about the other side of life. Sudden deaths of people close to her had driven her to explore the transient self that lies beyond the edges of form and narrative.

Ranja, as she was affectionately called, came across as a beautiful person—confident, and appearing completely in control of herself. My first meeting with her in Calcutta was supposed to be an official one—an interview related to her dance work—but it actually ended up being a marathon dance-gossip session! We also found we were of the same age and had African roots. We had grown up in Nigeria, in cities close to each other and yet never met. Strange coincidences seemed to have at times brought us close, and yet had kept us apart. Determined to complete the unfinished interview, we decided to meet again. Here are excerpts from what Ranja told me during our second meeting.

Her beginnings in dance

‘I learnt classical dance and creative movement from my mother since early childhood in Nigeria and the U. S. When I was sixteen, I came to India on my own to pursue further dance training with other teachers. Within a year or two I began to see my mother’s work in the Indian context and recognize it as radical. I began working with her after her return to India when I was 21. Since then she has been my primary mentor and my colleague. Most of the foundations of Nava Nritya were developed by us together . . .

‘I cannot define a “branching off” moment. There have always been different

energies that enriched our work. However, in the last six years, these differences related to our respective aesthetic and life experiences have become obvious and we have worked more as individuals than as collaborators . . .

'I think most beginnings are hard yet interesting . . . Although I continued to train [in] and even perform classical dance for many years, I knew as an artist that my directions were towards contemporary dance. The fact that it was as yet undefined and debated, was exciting and challenging. I imagine that period to be comparable to the pioneering days of Graham and Humphrey in America.

Response to her work in Calcutta

'I feel grateful to have had a positive response in Calcutta, other Indian cities and abroad. I have, on occasions, faced controversy, but when it is not politically motivated, I have taken it as positive. Dialogue and discussion are always necessary, particularly for contemporary forms. Calcutta seems to be generally open to new forms, that is, when the sincerity of the artist is evident.

Training methodology

'I felt the crisis of not having had a well-defined training technique as a third generation modern dancer about fifteen years ago. That is why I focused strongly on developing a training methodology in my early years of work at Dancer's Guild. I have followed my mother's belief that a classical dance base is necessary to give a firm foundation to the body. Its truth has been proven to me by my own experience. The base can offer a reference point from which to evolve. The problem is that it is very difficult to go from classical training directly into contemporary work. This is why we developed Nava Nritya as an alternative base, a secondary level between classical training and contemporary work.

'It is important to remember that while the methodology does emerge at first as a body language, it is essentially an approach to deconstructing, analysing and reconstructing movement. The difficulty in teaching Indian students is often their tendency to work through imitation only, without a kinesthetic understanding of the basics. This is a habit they inherit through outdated classical teaching methods. It is therefore essential that mind and body work together on a variety of levels.

'I feel that there is a big difference in the way modern dance evolved in India and the way it evolved in the west, and that it would be suicidal to try to follow those models [from western dance]. We in India have access to several highly developed movement systems: classical, semi-classical, folk, ritualistic, martial and yogic. The West is now turning to an international cocktail of movement forms to enrich the base training systems developed by various schools. I do not believe that our way should be to develop different body languages to teach the future generations, this is a very classical way of looking at it—but to develop ways of approaching existing languages so that students can develop their own language(s). When one is working with contemporary dance, the processes must also be contemporary. An individual choreographer may of course 'teach' his/her personal language to a group, but that is different from training students in general.

'My emphasis in teaching Nava Nritya is to give students an experience of a wide range of movements derived from various sources and connected to fundamental concepts of the body and its linear, spatial, gravitational relativity. However, I am not happy to teach movement in the abstract because I believe it is necessary to relate movement to motivation from an early level, rather than 'switch off' the mind and the heart in order to execute 'pure' form. For this

reason, imagery, both external and internal, influences movement from the very beginning.

Transition from being a performing artist in her mother's group to 'becoming' a soloist

'It has been an exciting period of discovery and growth. Working with groups for many years gave me the impetus to develop interesting training methods and choreographic aids with my mother. As time went on, particularly after I began to train in abhinaya and started practicing Zen, I became increasingly interested in the deeper exploration of emotion and subtle movement. This led me to explore on a more 'intimate' level. As a soloist I began performing in 1991 after six years of work.

Production work and creative impulses

'I think every artist's creative process and sources of inspiration are so embedded in the myriad aspects of life. All these operate on such a fluid and intuitive level that it is difficult to analyse the beginning, middle and end point of each work. Each production has its own joys and troubles depending on its scale, scope and any number of other variables, but then so does anything else in life!

Views on the history of Indian modern dance

'Indian modern dance has a history in the way that anything on earth, object, being, or event has a history. Nothing exists in a vacuum, without linear and spatial relationship. The history has been researched to some extent and continues to be so, although as far as I know this is more in relation to other topics under research by individual scholars. Needless to say, there is a tremendous amount of work yet to be done. While Uday Shankar did attempt to create a school of dance, he was unable to develop it due to the disintegration of his school in Almora.

'Tagore, however, did not at any time establish a 'style' or 'school'. His work remained on the level of experimentation until his death and he was unable even to realize many of his ideas due to social constraints. The work of Tagore was turned into a 'style' by his followers and as there had never been a basis for it to be so, it is not surprising that the so-called 'Tagore school' came to represent all that is stagnant and unaesthetic. I do not believe (like many do) that at present the maximum resistance to modern dance comes from these institutions. It is, in fact, the classicists who have created resistance towards any new, innovative work.

Opinion about growing emphasis on Indian-ness/ Indian sensibility in contemporary dance and life in India

I don't feel that there is any new emphasis of 'Indian sensibility' in contemporary Indian dance, i. e. more than what has been ever before. What is happening, rather is that there is growing confusion regarding purpose, parameters and technique and increasing lack of clarity regarding aesthetic values. The recent rise of the right-wing has created an unfortunate polarity between traditional Hindu-majority values, and liberal, secular tolerance in the guise of fighting fundamentalism and neo-colonial cultural imperialism. The right majority upholds retrogressive structures that are actually very similar to those of the so-called imperialists. In this climate, I feel any discussion of 'Indian sensibility' to be very dangerous indeed. It is reflective of a reductionist generalization of culture and society. It is also too close to ideas of nationalism, which Tagore rightly called the demon of this era.

Art

'I am not comfortable with art that is overtly political, in the sense of banner waving, but I do feel that my work is largely politically motivated. The kinds of themes I choose, the way in which I treat them, the way I choose to use or not use my body, all reflect a political orientation and certainly have political implications. Since my body is so strongly derived from within the Indian cultural fabric, my thematic search has been on a more universal level. I am wary of dealing with 'social issues' too directly, as I find this kind of didacticism rather naive. I believe that the immediate problems and issues we face in society have to do with deep-rooted human crises, and it is at this level that I try to explore the cause rather than the symptom.

Philosophy

'Religion is for me one of the most insidious distortions of the human spirit made for political gain and social control. I feel that true spirituality is much deeper than what organized religions deal with and very much a question of individual effort and responsibility. Religion is an easy way to avoid this responsibility. I also believe some of the philosophical concepts within religions are necessary in the development of individuals and by extension—one hopes—of the society.

After the interview, I went back comforted by a belief that modern dancers in India, like Ranja, had found their paths and arrived on the dance scene with a body of thoughts that had depth and appeal. In her dance she had travelled a long way from lyrical storytelling to abstract expressionism. In her life, she seemed to be constantly surrounded by friends and admirers who were ready to give her a helping hand. Yet no one seemed to have read her desperate signals of preparing to depart. Everyone I met who had heard of her death reacted the same way: 'she was so beautiful, why did she have to die?'

Her last words to me at Cochin seemed cryptic—'one should aim to achieve in art what one hasn't been able to achieve in life'. I wonder now, was the final act of hanging herself from a ceiling fan a dramatic performance that she had choreographed so painstakingly? Perhaps she was making a statement that she had not been able to make in her dance or life. The death of this dancer has left a void in the dance world. No more encores, no repeat performances.

Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival

A Review

Anjum Hasan

Anjum Hasan is a poet and critic, and is a Programme Officer with India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore.

[This volume contains three plays by Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta, and Poile Sengupta, with an introductory essay by C. S. Lakshmi (Ambai).]

C. S. Lakshmi's introduction is entitled *And Kannagi Plucked Out a Breast*. This has reference to the Tamil epic *Silappadhikaram*, where Kannagi's outrage against the injustice meted out to her husband leads her to wreak terrible violence not only on the outer world, but also on herself. Ambai discusses, with reference to instances from Tamil classical literature, how women have chosen to impose violence on their own bodies as a means to efface themselves, prove their chastity, or express their anger.

There is an implicit connection here between chastity, desire and violence that Ambai does not discuss. For from there she goes on to talk about family violence in the contemporary world, and asks, 'This violence, which seems to have a pathological existence in our lives, how does one begin its eradication?' Ambai's introduction is revealing because it brings together several stories from classical literature, and one is suddenly in a position to see how pervasive this particular understanding of woman, as a natural masochist, has been. On the other hand, what is disconcerting is precisely this—that literature is seen as an ally of the oppressors, that literary texts are essentially projections of certain attitudes, and can be very clearly read thus. *Silappadhikaram* becomes less a timeless, richly nuanced tale, and more a story that reveals how women in ancient India were perceived.

This approach becomes all the more marked in the plays that follow. If on the one hand is the prevalent belief that traditionally literature has held a distorted view of women, on the other is the tendency in contemporary writing to draw attention to, and analyse these distortions. This is the perception that, to my mind, mars all three plays included in this volume—Manjula Padmanabhan's *Lights Out*, Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* and Poile Sengupta's *Mangalam*. Even though each of these plays has its own particular strengths and weaknesses, each stereotypes women and attitudes towards them. One gets the impression that characters in these plays are illustrative of ideas about the way women are perceived and perceive themselves. Most of these characters are points of view in the guise of people. This is necessarily limiting and leaves the reader both dissatisfied and none the more 'liberated'.

Padmanabhan's *Lights Out* is based, as she says, on an actual incident where 'a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalised in the neighbouring compound.' However, this is something that is revealed only at the end. As the tension in the play builds up, one gets drawn into what seems like an absurd comedy—the insistent sounds of a woman's terrified screams are discussed by two nonchalant men and an uneasy woman in a manner that is almost bizarre. The absurdist element consists not in showing that these three 'ordinary' people are insensitive. In the first two-thirds of the play Padmanabhan seems to take that insensitivity as a given. What

she appears interested in exploring, against the backdrop of the Sound, are the implications of an insensitivity so extreme that it has developed a strange, cold logic of its own.

Consequently, a fourth and then a fifth character enter the scene of action. The Sound is identified as the screams of a woman being raped, and all five men and women are ultimately shown to be dithering, escapist idiots, either unwilling or unable to do a thing about the crime they are witnessing. This resolution is a let down because it seeks to establish the callousness it already presumes. What starts off as an interesting, complex play goes off in a disappointingly mundane direction. There is also the implicit assumption here that the fact that such an event occurred in real life, gives the play on which it is based, greater significance. It does not. In this case, the moral indignation the writer feels about the incident in question dilutes what could have been a much more serious, engaging play. My point is not that crime against women should not be condoned, but that there are subtler and artistically more authentic ways of doing this.

Dina Mehta's *Getting Away with Murder* centres on the lives of three friends—Mallika, a successful entrepreneur with an unhappy love life, Sonali, coping with neurosis from childhood abuse, and Razia, the gynaecologist, whose husband has just brought home another wife. Each of them comes through because of their own tenacity and with support from one another. The play just about holds one's attention. Parts of it are written with flair, like the scene with Mallika and her erratic lover, Gopal, where they discuss both their relationship and Gopal's striking photographs of women branded as witches in the towns and villages of Bihar.

Unfortunately, for the most part, Mehta's characters are stereotypes. Only Mallika, I think, from among them all, is able to emerge with some semblance of a personality. There is the lascivious and conniving male colleague, the modern yet forgiving wife, the understanding husband, the depraved uncle, the wicked mother-in-law, and so on. Many of these characters are mouthpieces for ideas and attitudes that seem either mundane or predictable. For instance, Mallika tells Sonali (a modern woman who for some strange reason wants to abort her unborn child if tests show it to be a girl), 'I thought only ignorant women had this prejudice! Or deprived women, with drudgery as their lot, who are sucked into further poverty and debts when they spawn daughters—because girls need dowries before they can be off-loaded. But to someone like you, how can it matter if the first child is a boy or a girl?' Surely neither Sonali nor the readers of Dina Mehta's plays need to be told these glaringly obvious facts. And underlying such passages is the same tendency to draw attention to women's issues that I discussed in connection with Manjula Padmanabhan's play.

Mangalam by Poile Sengupta compares well with *Getting Away with Murder* because, though equally concerned about human relationships, it is more open to their nuances and ambiguities. Also interesting is the way a dead woman is appropriated by those who knew her. And yet *Mangalam*—wife, sister, mother, mother-in-law—is never explained away. Her husband, Dorai had apparently mistreated her, and yet genuinely suffers from the fact that he was conned into marrying a pregnant woman. Her sister, Thangam, wails the loss of *Mangalam* throughout the play. Yet Revathy, *Mangalam*'s daughter-in-law, tells how *Mangalam* did not die of an illness but actually committed suicide because she wanted all who lived after her, including Thangam, to suffer her absence. Later in the play it is also revealed that it was Thangam's husband who raped *Mangalam*, just before she was married to Dorai. Was this something *Mangalam*

held against Thangam all her life? Revathy herself now rages against the unfairness with which Mangalam treated her, now talks with empathy about how much her mother-in-law suffered at Dorai's hands.

In all of this, other relationships within the family are also probed—Dorai's feelings for Sriram, his wife's bastard child who now has a 'good job' in the States; Usha's (Dorai and Mangalam's daughter) troubled marriage; the deep bitterness between Thangam and Dorai. The first act is complete in itself, where alongside the unfolding of the dead woman's story, other events in the family's life are also played out. The second act, where the events of the first become part of a play seen by 'modern' characters, is a grave disappointment. The purpose of the second act is to show how distant the 'play' appears to the new protagonists, and yet how their own lives mirror similar disappointments and betrayals. This is not only in itself a banal conclusion to force on the reader, it also undermines the strength of the first act.

For instance, Sumati, a character in Act 2, says of the 'play', 'The play is in English, you know, but it's about a small-town Tamil family . . . In actual life, a family like that would not use English at all . . . And what the writer has tried to do is use an un-English syntax to show that the characters are not meant to be speaking in English. The things they said, the images they used, were not English . . .' She earlier speaks about how out of place she herself feels: 'I'm not English, because I'm brown and eat with my fingers. I don't belong to India because I think in English . . .' Passages like these do nothing for the play. They are neither intrinsic to the situation being portrayed, nor tell us anything we do not already know about confused English-speaking Indians. And as a matter of fact, it is the story of the first Thangam that comes across more authentically than that of the brisk, English-speaking woman who is her later incarnation.

Body Blows is revealing about the way contemporary Indian playwrights think about their craft. It makes one look forward to the time when these writers cease to think of playwriting as a platform for views about women's issues, and move towards creating both male and female characters of greater depth and individuality. There is enough in this volume to suggest that this is possible.

[*Body Blows: Women, Violence and Survival*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000.]

Theatre Log

Nandikar's 16th National Theatre Festival

Nandikar has been organizing an annual National Theatre festival in Calcutta since 1984. Groups from all over the country as well as abroad have taken part in this event which has earned a distinct identity over the years. The Nandikar National Theatre Festival, 1999, was held at the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta, from 16 to 25 December. The festival was inaugurated by Professor Chandrashekhar Kambar and Syed Shamsul Haq, Abdullah Al-Mamun, Aly Zaker, Selim Al Deen and Mohan Maharishi were felicitated at the award ceremony.

The first two days featured two National School of Drama Repertory productions in Hindi—*Bhook Aag Hai* and *Raja Ki Rasoi*. The groups from other Indian states included Nth, Hyderabad with *Zest and Zeal* in English directed by Moin Ali Baig, FLT, Manipur with *Awang Nongpoklamgee Nawa* in Manipuri directed by Lokendra Arambam, Manoranjan, Pune with *Surya Pahilela Manus* in Marathi directed by Atul Pethe and performed by Dr Sriram Lagoo, PD Association, Pune with *www.golayug.com* in Marathi directed by Makarand Sathe, and Rangayan, Mysore with *Shoodra Tapaswi* in Kannada directed by Basavalingaiah.

Bangladesh was represented by two productions in Bengali—*Bhelua Sundari* by CAT directed by Saidur Rahaman Lipon, and *Haat Hadai* by Dhaka Theatre directed by Nasiruddin Yousuff. A bilingual play (Bengali and English) *Nuraldeener Sarajiban* directed by Sudipto Chattopadhyay was presented by Epic Actors' Workshop and Choir, USA. The other Bengali plays presented by groups from Calcutta and Howrah included Anubash's *Apurba Golap* directed by Sekhar Samaddar and Nandikar's *Maramia Mon* directed by Goutam Halder. The Hindi play *Rudali*, presented by Rangakarmee, Calcutta, was directed by Sangeet Natak Akademi award winner, Usha Ganguli.

A seminar on the topic 'Theatre in the Next Millennium' was also held on this occasion with participants from India, Bangladesh and USA.

Festival of Performing Arts, Pune

The Bhimsen Joshi Chair and the Lalit Kala Kendra, University of Pune, presented a Festival of Performing Arts for the Indian Science Congress

from 3 to 6 January. The performances of music and dance were held at the Jai Vigyan Mandap of the University. The inaugural evening featured Dr M. Balamuralikrishna and Pandit Bhimsen Joshi in recitals of Carnatic and Hindustani vocal respectively. The other artistes included Dr Vikas Kashalkar and Dr Veena Sahasrabuddhe, both Hindustani classical vocalists, Kathak by Pandita Rohini Bhate and her disciples and Bharatnatyam by Dr Sucheta Chapekar and her disciples.

The theatre performances were held at the Dr Chandrashekhar Auditorium. They included *Sakhi Mazi Lavni* presented by Madhu Kambikar and directed by Upendra Limaye, *Seeta-Swayamwar* presented by Lalit Kala Kendra and directed by Praveen Bole, *Shobhayatra* produced by Shrichitra-Chitralekha and directed by Ganesh Yadav, and *Mahanirvan* produced by Theatre Academy, Pune and written and directed by Satish Alekar.

25 Years of Rangakarmee

The Calcutta based theatre group, Rangakarmee, headed by Usha Ganguli began their Silver Jubilee celebrations with a festival of plays from 16 to 20 January. The festival was dedicated to the memory of actress Keya Chakraborty. The Rangakarmee productions featured in the festival included *Rudali*, *Mukti*, *Beti Aayee*, *Inspector Matadin Chandpar*, *Maiyyat*, *Himmat Mai* and *Court Martial*. The other participating artistes were Chapal Bhaduri with *Sitala Mangal Pala* and Sudip Gupta with *Dancing Dolls*.

This festival was followed by Samanvay, a national convention of performing women, which is an attempt at initiating a series of dialogues between women performers. The first Samanvay was held in Calcutta from 24 to 26 March.

The inaugural session was 'Actresses speak on their creative experiences', with Heisnam Sabitri and Saonli Mitra. Nabaneeta Deb Sen was the chief guest. In the second session, 'Actresses speak and demonstrate on their methods of acting', Pratibha Agrawal and Zarin Chaudhuri presented short excerpts from their work. The evening performances at the Academy of Fine Arts featured Tripura Kashyap from Apoorva, Bangalore, Poonam Tiwari of Naya Theatre, Bhopal, H. Sabitri from Manipur, veteran actresses of the Bengali theatre, Sova Sen, Ketaki Dutta and Maya Ghosh,

and Usha Ganguli herself.

The first session on the following morning, coordinated by Dr Malini Bhattacharya, focused on 'Theatre, Politics and Culture' with Sova Sen and Mala Hashmi participating. The next session, 'Cinema, stage and their experiences', tried to bring together actresses who had started their careers on the professional stage and subsequently moved on to film. Anuradha Chanda interacted with Madhabi Mukhopadhyay in this session. In the post-lunch session Chetna Jalan and Tripura Kashyap spoke on their attempts to use dance in theatre. This was followed by an interactive session with Ketaki Dutta, Maya Ghosh, Usha Ganguli and Anjum Katyal.

In the concluding session on 26 March, Usha Athale of IPTA, Raigarh, Sugita Padihari and Suraj Bai Khande spoke on their experiences. The performances included songs by Usha Athale and Sugita Padihari, Pandvani by Suraj Bai Khande, Sohrai Santhal Nritya by artists from Birbhum, and *Beti Aayee* by Rangakarmee.

South Indian Theatre Festival, 2000

To celebrate its 10th anniversary, the Tamil Nadu Kattaikkuttu Kalai Valarchi Munetra Sangam organized their annual South Indian Theatre Festival in Kanchipuram from 3 to 7 March. The all night festival featured traditional performances of Kutiyattam, Kathakali, Theyyam, Yakshagana, Vita Natakam and Isai Natakam as well as puppetry, contemporary theatre and dance dramas. The participating groups were from all the four southern states and included Kerala Kalamandalam, Agni from Madurai, Kattaikkuttu Sangam from Kanchipuram, Koothu-p-pattarai from Chennai, Ganesha Yakshagana Mandali from Mangalore Natanakairali from Irinjalakuda, and Voicing Silence from Chennai.

Theatre Workshop

Theatre Platform, Khardah organized a three-day theatre workshop for the first time from 17 to 19 March. The workshop, open to aspiring actors above the age of 15, concluded with short demonstrations before audiences on 20 March. Theatre Platform now plans to organize advance workshops every two months which will be led by

experts from various parts of the country.

***Pavazhakodi* by Voicing Silence**

Voicing Silence, Chennai, has worked this year with professional women stage artistes of popular traditional forms of Tamil Nadu to produce *Pavazhakodi*. This project has brought the artistes together to share, document and exchange views both on their performance styles as well as their lives as women. The play was performed by a group of eleven women in the koothu style and was directed by P. Rajagopal under the auspices of the Kattai Koothu Kalai Vallarchi Munetra Sangam. The culmination of a process begun three years ago, the play fuses contemporary gender and artistic concerns with traditional forms.

The play developed in a process which began as a 2-day workshop in which the women performers spoke of their lives as women artistes, the link between their professional and personal lives, the representation of women on stage and the evolution of their art form. Based on this material, Dr. K. A. Gunasekharan from the School of Drama, Pondicherry University constructed a script interweaving one of the original plays of Sanakaradas Swamigal with a realistic portrayal of the behind-the-scenes lives of the performers. The constant shift between the two worlds emphasizes the intertwined realities and the shifting counterpoint between lives, dreams, performances and values.

STQ invites theatre individuals and groups to send in reports and announcements of productions, workshops, seminars and other significant news items they wish to share with the theatre community through the forum of this Notebook.

New Releases from Seagull Books

New Indian Playwrights

Banchharam's Orchard
and
An Encounter with Royalty

Manoj Mitra

Translated by Ranjan and Sangeeta Ghoshal

ISBN 81 7046 105 7

Rs. 150

These farcical comedies by Bengali playwright Manoj Mitra take a sharp dig at class and caste relations in rural India under the guise of rollicking humour. *Banchharam's Orchard* (*Sajano Bagan*) tells the hilarious tale of old Banchharam who, by his refusal to die, out-manoeuvres all those who are waiting greedily to lay claim to his valuable and beloved orchard, particularly the greedy zamindar who hungers for his death. *An Encounter with Royalty* (*Rajdarshan*), turns the pomp and power of kingship on its head as an impoverished old brahman enters the body of the dead king.

Manoj Mitra is amongst the best known and most widely produced playwrights of Bengali theatre. He is also a well-known actor and director, and heads the theatre group Sundaram.

Ranjan and Sangeeta Ghoshal, a husband and wife team, are both in advertising and are active in theatre. They are based in Bangalore.

New Indian Playwrights

The Shadow of the Tiger and
Other Plays

Chandrasekhar Kambar

ISBN 81 7046 142 1

Rs 175

Chandrasekhar Kambar is a leading poet, novelist, folklorist and dramatist writing in Kannada. 'I belong

geographically to a village, and sociologically to what was considered to be an oppressed, uneducated class. I am, therefore, a folk person simply because I honestly cannot be anything else.' His plays rework his folk heritage from a contemporary perspective, blending folk performance forms, myths, legends and ritual beliefs. The result is a colourful tapestry of music, dance, song, farce and narration which nevertheless delivers hardhitting blows at the feudal social system which still exists in rural India today.

The three plays in this volume illustrate the broad range of Chandrasekhar Kambar's playwriting. *The Shadow of the Tiger* is a symbolic and philosophic work concerned with illusion and reality, and contesting forms of truth. *Tukra's Dream* centres on a poor villager who survives precariously on the very edges of rural society. In *Alibaba and the Forty Thieves* the well known tale becomes an enjoyable spoof as well as a comment on greed. Celebrated as a poet in his home state of Karnataka, Kambar's work is imbued with a poetic sensibility, laced with earthy humour.

Body Blows:

Women, Violence and Survival

Three plays

Manjula Padmanabhan, Dina Mehta,
Poile Sengupta

with an introductory essay by C. S.
Lakshmi ('Ambai').

ISBN 81 7046 1714

Rs 250

Women face violence in many aspects of their daily lives, from total strangers on the street who view them as sexual objects, from members of the family, from a society which assigns them a status lower than men. This violence is

multifaceted: not merely physical, it is more often mental and emotional, subtle and indirect, often insidious and hard to recognize, presented, as it usually is, in the guise of respect, idealization, concern, protectiveness or passion. The effects of violence on a women's psyche are deeply complex, hard to understand and even more difficult to overcome.

The women playwrights in this volume focus on all these various kinds of violence and abuse that women face. Sensitive, nuanced texts, together these plays make up a powerful volume focusing on one of the most important and problematic issues of our society.

In *Lights Out*, the daily mystery of heart-rending screams from a woman in obvious pain destroys the fabric of domesticity of a middle-class couple, divided in their response to her anguish. As the play unfolds, one begins to realize that she is not the only woman coping with abuse. *Getting Away with Murder* follows three friends through their own private hells, as they deal with childhood sexual abuse, infidelity and insecure relationships, to emerge as stronger women at the end of it. *Mangalam* shows how abuse and violence span the generations, remaining a constant even though society moves towards 'modernity'.

Dina Mehta is a playwright, novelist and editor based in Mumbai. She has written several award-winning plays.

Manjula Padmanabhan is a writer and cartoonist living in Delhi. She has several publications to her credit.

Poile Sengupta, based in Bangalore, has been a teacher, writer for children, poet, columnist and playwright.

C. S. Lakshmi, or Ambai, as she is widely known, is a leading Tamil fiction writer and activist on women's issues.

Theatre Studies/Photography/Culture Studies

Dramatic Moments

Photographs and Memories of Calcutta Theatre from the Sixties to the Nineties

Nemai Ghosh

ISBN 81 7046 156 1

Rs. 900

Nemai Ghosh is best known for his photographs of Satyajit Ray at work and in his more private moments and moods, and his stills from Ray's films. Ghosh has exhibited at Cannes in 1991, at London in 1992, and several times at Calcutta and Delhi, and published a selection of his Ray collection, *Satyajit Ray at 70: Photographs by Nemai Ghosh*, with a preface by Henri Cartier-Bresson (Brussels 1991).

His second collection of photographs forms a pictorial history of theatre in Calcutta over the last four decades. He concentrates on the experimental theatre groups of the city and its neighbourhood—more than a hundred of them active at any given point of time—with a repertoire that features the whole range of classical and modern dramaturgy from all over the world as well as original, indigenous works. The photographs capture the distinctive individualities of renowned directors, actors and actresses like Sombhu Mitra, Utpal Dutt, Tripti Mitra, Badal Sircar, Ajitesh Bandyopadhyay, Manoj Mitra, Bibhash Chakraborty, Keya Chakraborty, Kumar Roy, and others, in performance as well as in directorial presence. Commentaries by theatre critic Samik Bandyopadhyay contextualize the performances that are further illuminated by a selection of readings and memorabilia—poems, directors' notes, interviews, reminiscences.

Ghosh had begun his artistic career as an actor, and brings to his theatre photography a strong subjective slant, the dramatic moments representing his

own reading of situations, drawing on his memories and associations as an actor—the outsider/ recorder turning insider to catch a fleeting, delicate shade. As he puts it himself, ‘As a viewer and as a man who had loved and been in theatre, I compose my shots to underscore the dramatic elements and thrusts.’

Theatre History/Cultural Studies

Playwright at the Centre **Marathi Drama from 1843 to the Present**

Shanta Gokhale

ISBN 81 7046 157X

Rs. 795

The Marathi theatre has been vigorously alive now for over one hundred and fifty years in a continuously vital way. It is one of the most active and prominent regional theatre traditions in this country. This pathbreaking study takes a close look at two streams of secular, urban theatre—the touring professional theatre centred in Mumbai, whose audience is largely the educated middle-class of Maharashtra’s small towns and cities; and the ‘other’ or ‘parallel’ theatre which came into being in the early fifties—with Mumbai, Pune and Nagpur as its centres—in rejection of the mainstream theatre which had become irrelevant to the post-Independence generation of college-educated youth.

This is the first such history of Marathi drama to be attempted in English. Positing the centrality of the playwright to Marathi theatre, this volume takes a close look at milestones and breakthroughs, at significant plays and the trends they spawned. Particularly valuable are the extensive extracts, allowing the reader a rare glimpse of scripts which are otherwise impossible to access.

The introduction is a rapid journey through one hundred years of theatre from 1843 to 1943, with halts along the

way to look more closely at a play, a breakthrough, or a sign of audience taste that might have had a bearing on the direction in which theatre moved. Section one picks out for close examination the important works of the most significant playwrights of the ‘golden age’ of contemporary Marathi theatre, during which the parallel theatre movement was born, burgeoned and went to seed, and the mainstream theatre grew to full maturity. The second section comprises an overview of theatre activity from 1985 to the present day, including verbatim interviews with contemporary playwrights. Additional material includes a section of long extracts from contemporary plays, otherwise unavailable in print, interviews with directors who are closely involved with the playwrights of today, and a section of rare archival photographs.

Shanta Gokhale is a leading theatre critic and writer, and this book is based on years of research and an intimate knowledge of the theatre world she writes about.